

CREATING MEXICAN CONSUMER CULTURE

IN THE AGE OF PORFIRIO DÍAZ, 1876-1911

by

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Introduction

All the world's a store,

The importance of the Almighty Dollar, there's nothing more

Its retail counter stretches across the planet all,

Where the daring win and the fools fall.

--“Mercantilismo

Puro,”

a

poem.

México Gráfico, April 27, 1890, 6. [1](#)

This dissertation identifies and analyzes an accelerating modern consumer culture in Mexico during the rule of Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911. It considers both the local and national experience of a global process. In doing so, it outlines the growth of a domestic consumer market and manufacturing base, the transformation of retailing and advertising, and the implications for social and cultural development within the context of the economic and cultural modernization program of Porfirian Mexico. The goal of this project is to demonstrate the usefulness of consumption as a category of analysis in Mexican history.

This topic requires definitions and clarifications. To begin, culture is the production of meaning; it is the ideas, activities, and objects with which we construe and construct our world. By the Porfiriato, the influence of consumption upon national culture, especially but not solely urban culture, was well established. Consumption is defined as the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used. Consumption, while usually perceived to possess only an economic function (and that as a mere byproduct of production), is thoroughly cultural in character. Among other purposes, individuals and societies use consumer goods to express cultural categories (such as gender, class, race, and 1 The original text is: Es una casa de comercio el globo,/Sin otro principal que don Dinero/Y sin más mostrador que el mundo entero/Donde gana el audaz, y pierde el bobo. . .

1

age), to cultivate lifestyles, to construct notions of the self, and to create and survive social changes. While an inquiry into the nature of Porfirian consumption could proceed in a myriad of directions this dissertation will concentrate on the relationship between consumption and the modernization process. In particular, it emphasizes the way in which consumption

intertwined with the leadership's drive to modernize both the economy and the people. This consumer culture helped to define the visual reality of cities as manifested in the architecture, street life, and private spaces of urbanites. Equally important, its presence permeated public language, with consumer goods, institutions, and values providing the vocabulary and metaphors many used to help explain and understand the increasingly rapid changes that characterized their lives. In other words, goods and the language of goods gave shape and form to the abstract condition of modernity in which many people believed they lived.

The study of consumption raises basic questions pertaining to its scope and deserves discussion of many areas not fully addressed in the text. First, who are the consumers in the incomplete market economy of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? A rare calculation of this market comes from economic historian Stephen Haber who estimated that in 1895—midway through the Porfiriato—5 million people out of a population of just over 12 million participated in the market for consumer goods. He based this conclusion on the assumption that 2 million workers engaged in non-agricultural wage-earning sectors and supported approximately 1.5 other people. ² Research for this dissertation suggests this may be conservative. Moreover, while wage-earning facilitates consumption it is not necessary.

² Stephen H. Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 27. By 1910, the national population had increased to 15,000,000.

Population statistics from Moisés González Navarro, *Estadísticas sociales del Porfiriato, 1877-1910* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1956), 7.

The importance of barter and other such forms of exchange also deserve consideration, particularly in this case where a cash economy is not fully developed or where shortages of specie remain common.

Two assumptions often jump to mind upon discussing consumption in Porfirian Mexico: first, that this is a phenomenon among urban—and particularly Mexico City—

residents; and second, that only the affluent tip of the social pyramid participated. Both are false. As the next section explains, abundant evidence suggests that consumption of modern goods involved both urban and rural populations although obviously to a much greater degree in cities. These leads are crucial to understanding the national impact of this process in a predominately rural country and beg further investigations into the fluidity of the population, goods, and ideas during the era. ³ While future research will be required to demonstrate quantitatively and conclusively the geographic breadth of the consumer market beyond the metropolis, this dissertation does make clear its depth among social classes and reveals the outlines of a working-class consumer market that should surprise no one familiar with urban life in the Republic or histories of labour and consumerism elsewhere in the world during the same period. ⁴ Both women and men actively participated in the consumer ³ In addition to the monumental work of Moisés González Navarro (*El Porfiriato: la vida social*, vol. 4 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed. Daniel Cosío Villegas [Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972]), other studies more attentive to the material culture of nineteenth-century and Porfirian Mexico (including non-urban areas) are William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) and Luis González, *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, trans. John Upton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974). Although geographer Michael Johns argues that the Díaz regime shaped a nation of nihilists and his work is rife with factual errors, he constructs a boots on the ground view of daily life so impressive in detail and scope that it deserves a historian to at least come in and fix its mistakes.

Michael Johns, *The City of Mexico in the Age of Díaz* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

The work of American historian T. H. Breen offers interesting possibilities for modern Mexican historians in comparing how consumerism intersects with politics and revolution in *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4 For the most recent and path-breaking work on the impact of modern consumption upon the daily life and identity of the French working class from the 1870s until World War II, see Helen Harden Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender: Working Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University 3

economy. In a country with such a large indigenous population, the question arises of how racially integrated was this consumer market. The answer depends on a number of factors such as whether the individual relied upon wages, lived in the city, and social status.

Numerous accounts report that the sight of Indians in clothing stores and other fixed-location retailers was not unusual. ⁵ This does not even consider the blend of traditional and modern goods sold in market and by street vendors. Moreover, at least one French writer emphasized the indigenous market for items such as imported candles and jewelry. ⁶ Nevertheless, in the Porfirian language of modernization and national identity the Indian (defined culturally as much as racially) played a purely regressive role, a foil to demonstrate progressive triumphs and a scapegoat on which to blame failures. As is often the case, the construction of Indian as the uncivilized other obscures their true levels of participation in modernizing society.

Second, where was this consumer culture? For the sake of manageability, this dissertation focuses on Mexico City, the largest consumer market in the Republic⁷ with the occasional foray beyond. At the same time, as

mentioned above, this process extended far beyond the capital. ⁸ Urban residents throughout the country enjoyed many of the consumer institutions and products enjoyed by residents of the national capital. Although economies Press, 2005). In the historiography of labour in the United States consult Lawrence Glickman, *American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁵ See Chapter Three.

⁶ Between 1895 and 1910, the population of Mexico City increased from 330,000 to 471,000 and that of the whole Federal District more than 50% greater. The next largest urban markets in 1910 were Guadalajara (119,000), Puebla (93,000), Monterrey (79,000), San Luis Potosí (68,000), and Mérida (62,000). González Navarro, *Estadísticas sociales del Porfiriato*, 9; *Estadísticas históricas de México* (Mexico City: INEGI, 1984), 24-32.

⁷ After discussing the drag on the consumer market provided by the indigenous population, F. Bianconi mentions that they have at least improved their clothing and that the Mexican people, “like all people in the world, are consumers.” He then proceeds to discuss the market for jewelry in Mexico and notes that the indigenous population is a voracious consumer of a lower-end product line. F. Bianconi, *Le Mexique à la portée des industriels, des capitalistes, des négociants, importateurs et des travailleurs* (Paris: Imprimerie Chaix, 1899), 112-113.

⁸ This was a predominately rural country: in 1910 the census determined 29% of the population resided in urban areas and 71% in rural. The census defined urban as populations greater than 4,000. *Estadísticas históricas de México*, 33; González Navarro, *Estadísticas sociales del Porfiriato*, 150.

remained local and regional to a great extent, the rapid development of the national railway system⁹ combined with new production technologies and a

wave of imported goods greatly contributed towards the making a national market. ¹⁰ Whether in state capitals such as Monterrey, Chihuahua, Puebla, Guadalajara, or even Oaxaca, ¹¹ residents and visitors could shop in modern department stores or their French-derived predecessors (*almacenes de novedades*) for local and imported goods, smoke El Buen Tono brand cigarettes, drink Cuauhtémoc brand beer, and read mass-circulation local or national newspapers filled with 9 The mileage of railroads increased from just over 600 kilometres in 1876 (mostly the Veracruz-Mexico City line) to over 19,000 kilometres in 1910, with the greatest growth during the 1880s. For railroad development consult Luis Nicolau d'Olwer, et al., *El Porfiriato: La vida económica*, vol. 7 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed. Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 483-634.

¹⁰ Most historians would have considered this statement untenable until fairly recently. The postrevolutionary assertion that the Porfirian regime could be reduced to a cabal of *vendepatrias* (traitors, literally “sellers of the homeland”) received additional support from dependency theorists throughout the 1970s and 1980s. One of the most powerful supports for this position came from the work of John H. Coatsworth, whose impressive economic research produced *Growth Against Development: The Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981) and quickly entered the historiographical canon. In it, Coatsworth argued that railroads, financed and constructed by foreign (mostly American) interests, serviced an export economy interested only in rapid growth rather than developing a national market and therefore contributed to the nation’s economic backwardness and reliance upon export-oriented economic enclaves (such as mining and agriculture). By the mid-1990s a group of Mexican scholars began to question Coatsworth’s thesis. Two of the most prominent, Paolo Riguzzi and Sandra Kuntz Ficker, demonstrated that capital transfers from Mexican railroads to shareholders in the United States were far less than claimed by Coatsworth (Riguzzi,

“Inversión extranjera e interés nacional en los ferrocarriles mexicanos, 1880-1914,” in *Las inversiones extranjeras en América Latina, 1850-1930*, coord. Carlos Marichal [Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica/El Colegio de México, 1995]). Kuntz Ficker demonstrated that railroads

developed a national market far more and exported far less than previously conceived, noting that between 1898 and 1905 the volume of cargo exported abroad accounted for a mere 2.5% of total cargo transported by railroad during the same period. Kuntz Ficker, *Empresa extranjera y mercado interno: El Ferrocarril Central Mexicano, 1880-1907* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1995). The statistic comes from her useful introduction to Kuntz Ficker and Priscilla Connolly, coords., *Ferrocarriles y obras públicas* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 1999), 30.

11 Only two published scholarly works consider department stores in Porfirian Mexico. For stores in Chihuahua and Monterrey, see Steven B. Bunker, “‘Consumers of Good Taste’: Marketing Modernity in Northern Mexico, 1890-1910,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 227-269. For Puebla, see Leticia Gambo Ojeda, “Los barcelonnettes en la ciudad de Puebla: Panorama de sus actividades económicas en el porfiriato,” in *México Francia: Memoria de una sensibilidad común, Siglos XIX-XX*, coord. Javier Pérez Siller (Mexico City: Editorial Ducere, 1998). A perusal of business directories or newspaper announcements uncover new, purpose-built department stores (meaning the owners constructed a new, usually stand-alone building following the modern retailing model) such as the Fábricas de Francia store in Guadalajara (*Le Courrier du Mexique*, Oct. 15, 1899, 3) or renovated and redesigned *almacenes de novedades* that adopted department store organization within a traditional building. One of the most useful resources is J. Figueroa Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Ramón de S. N. Araluce, 1899). This second volume deals exclusively with states and territories, providing descriptions and often photos of major commercial establishments. For example, pages 241-250 display clothing and fashion stores in the city of Guadalajara, the second largest population center of the Republic.

advertising. If they could not find the goods they desired, they could order them from the capital. Much like the Bon Marché in Paris (after which many of the Mexican stores were patterned), department stores such as Palacio de Hierro, Puerto de Liverpool, Fábricas de Francia, and Centro Mercantil distributed catalogues, sent samples through the mail for free, and delivered goods throughout the Republic. Those deliveries received free transportation for orders of \$50 pesos per weight limit ranging from 15 to 50 kilograms to the nearest railway station or, in the case of the Centro Mercantil, free for purchases over \$20 pesos (if the customer needed further assistance, a delivery company could be hired at an additional rate). ¹² Modern goods, advertising, and attitudes reached further beyond these urban islands.

Towns and even villages received provisions from a variety of sources. Railways branched off or stopped at smaller population centres while many remote locations relied upon traditional mule trains and even individual peddlers and traveling salesmen. In towns, a single store often sold a wide variety of goods ranging from pastas to patent medicines and piano sheet music through the agency system of exclusive distribution rights. Companies in Mexico City and other urban areas sent traveling salesmen (sometimes numbering into the hundreds) carrying samples throughout the Republic often into remote areas drumming up business. Popular and aggressively marketed products such as Singer sewing machines and El Vulcano brand brass or aluminum beds ended up in relatively remote places. ¹³ Itinerant peddlers performed a similar function. That every state, in response to local merchant ¹² A great number of department store newspaper ads mentioned the Republic-wide shipping policies. For a sample, see *El Imparcial*, Mar. 5, 1899, 4 (Fábricas Universales); *El Imparcial*, Sept. 25, 1899, 4 (Centro Mercantil); *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Aug. 3, 1902, 13 (Progreso Mercantil); *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Mar. 4, 1900, 15

(Palacio de Hierro). For a greater explanation of the nation-wide delivery offices and policies of Mexico City department stores, see *Grandes Almacenes de “El Palacio de Hierro” Obsequio a nuestros favorecedores*.

Agenda para el año 1900 (Mexico City: Tip. El Lápiz de Águila, 1900), 9-10. At least as early as 1875

“Espress Mexicano” based in Mexico City promised to deliver goods “to any point in the Republic” for a modest commission. See *El Centro Mercantil*, Nov. 22, 1875, 4, for this and the company’s close relationship with the “Empresa General de Anuncios” (General Advertising Company).

13 For a description of a Singer salesman and his impact on a small town, see González, *San José de Gracia*, 99.

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complaints, required salesmen and peddlers to register in a government office and often pay a tax attests to the numbers and breadth of this mobile sales army. [14](#) Immigrant communities dedicated to commerce—from the Americans, French, and Germans, to the Chinese and Lebanese—played an essential role in fostering this consumer culture and expanded market.

Jurgen Buchenau used the term trade conquistadors to describe these groups in his study of the German community. [15](#) As Chapters 3 and 4 will show, the Barcelonnette community from France was one of the largest and perhaps most influential, dominating the textile manufacturing trade in the country and combining its products with imported goods to set up a network of clothing and dry goods stores that radiated out from Mexico City. In short, although this project focuses on Mexico City the phenomenon is far more national than previously imagined and will benefit from further attention.

What did Porfirian Mexicans consume? The answer defies cataloging, ranging from artisanal specialties for popular holidays (such as papier maché figures for Judas burnings) to machine-rolled cigarettes, pulque, beer, domestically produced textiles, patent medicines for [14](#) The French colony’s business magazine, *Le Mexique*, detailed the travails of commercial agents perhaps even more than *La Semana Mercantil* and *El*

Economista Mexicano. For one listing of the fees and other requirements paid by non-resident merchant along with mention of the state registration office—the *Administración de Rentas y Contribuciones*—see *Le Mexique*, June 5, 1898, 40. For an idea of numbers, in 1896 the French apparel store La Ciudad de Mexico boasted of over 500 traveling salesmen. La Ciudad de Mexico to José Yves Limantour, Mexico City, Oct. 24, 1896, CDLIV 1883-1899, Roll 8, Carp. 30, Archivo José Yves Limantour, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México CONDUMEX, Chimalistac, Mexico City, hereafter cited as JYL-CONDUMEX. For a brief description of the resistance faced by traveling salesman by local merchants and the politics involved in Sonora, see Miguel Tinker Salas, *In the Shadow of the Eagles: Sonora and the Transformation of the Border during the Porfiriato* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 234-238.

15 The term is Walther L. Bernecker's, from *Die Handelskonquistadoren: Europäische Interessen und mexickanischer Staat im 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Steiner-Verlag, 1988), cited in Jürgen Buchenau, *Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico, 1865-Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), especially 7-17. For information on the American commercial community, consult William Schell, *Integral Outsiders: The American Colony in Mexico City, 1876-1911* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001). On the Chinese, see Tinker Salas, *In the Shadow of the Eagles*, in particular Chapter 10,

“The Politics of Scapegoating in Porfirian Sonora,” pp. 223-238, especially 223-229. On the Lebanese community, see Theresa Alfaro Velcamp, “Arabs, Conflict, Community and the Mexican Nation in the Twentieth Century,” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2001); and Eric N. Baklanoff, “From Peddlers to Empresarios: The Lebanese in Latin America,” *South Eastern Latin Americanist* 43, no. 1 (1999).

gonorrhea, or the higher-end imported *objets d'art* and automobiles. The material culture of late-nineteenth-century Mexico expanded far more rapidly than historians have given it credit. Insights may be found in photographic archives and newspaper photos documenting the goods desired and acquired across the spectrum: the abundance at local markets; of street vendors; of full Spanish grocery stores with names such as *Ultramarino*; of the home decorating paradise of Claudio Pellandini's downtown shop; or the luxuriant abundance or chaotic excitement at the department stores or their smaller competitors. Store catalogues and agendas list thousands of goods for every occasion and need. The new mass-circulation media including a working-class penny press adopted abundant advertising (as well as government subsidies in several cases) to keep prices low and daily readership high, reportedly up to 100,000 for *El Imparcial* by 1907. The press not only documented consumer goods for sale; it became one of the fastest-growing consumed commodities itself.

The market for printed goods exploded as material costs dropped, printing and graphic reproduction technologies improved, and literacy rates rose. Newspapers, pulp fiction (sold in the infamous *bibliotecas económicas* or on the streets) and a plethora of advertising mediums such as billboards, handbills, posters and trade cards blended text and graphic images as they added to the visual and literary culture of the cities. Modern societies became more literate they also became more visual. [16](#) National literacy rose from 17% in 1895 to 29% in 1910. Regional disparities reflected state wealth and school expenditures. Adult literacy rates in 1910 ranged from 45% in the north to 14% in the south with the centre 16 On the connection between visual and written texts in modern society, see Vanessa R Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2.

averaging 27%. By 1900 the Federal District boasted a 49% adult literacy rate that rose to 65% by 1910. [17](#)

Like any other, the market was far from homogenous and often serious economic limitations as well as cultural preferences prescribed and proscribed purchases for many individuals. The ability to consume (economic) must also be balanced with the desire to consume (social and cultural). Domestic and imported goods competed in many categories as tariffs and other governmental and economic factors served to cultivate manufacturing for the domestic consumer market. ¹⁸ Like today, consumption patterns differed between those higher and lower on the socio-economic scale. The urban poor tended to focus consumption (and conspicuous consumption) more on entertainment and sociability (theatre, circus, cinema, gambling, *pulquerías*, *figones*) as well as portable wealth such as jewelry or—in the traditional Mexican case—expensive hats with jewelry, particularly silver. They also consumed more domestically-produced goods but not all imports were out of reach or interest. Those who considered themselves *gente decente*—members of respectable society—could be described economically as the middling to upper classes but were more accurately defined by their cultural embrace of contemporary definitions of progress. In general, they ascribed to western bourgeois values and emphasized different areas of consumption. In addition to different categories of entertainments, jewelry, and medicines, they earmarked greater expenditures on domestic improvements (linens, furniture, tableware, plumbing, and etcetera), fashion, and items representing new technologies of human 17 Mary Kay Vaughan, “Primary Education and Literacy in Nineteenth-Century Mexico: Research Trends, 1968-1988,” *Latin American Research Review* 25, no. 1 (1990):31-66, especially pp. 42-43. For the federal district rate, consult *Estadísticas históricas de México*, 92.

18 Edward Beatty, *Institutions and Investment: The Political Basis of Industrialization in Mexico Before 1911*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); and Mario Cerutti, *Burguesia, capitales e industria en el norte de México: Monterrey y su ámbito regional* (Monterrey: Alianza Editorial, 1992).

progress, such as bicycles and automobiles. They enjoyed greater security of both person and property thanks to greater police resources devoted to areas of the city increasingly segregated by class divisions. ¹⁹ As a result, practical concerns meshed with cultural proclivities of materializing modernity allowing this segment of urban society to consume more conspicuously. The extensive use of credit among all levels of society expanded both who could consume and what they were able to purchase. ²⁰

Of course, the question of why people consume is the holy grail of marketers as well as historians of consumption. Several excellent works have approached this question from a variety of angles. ²¹ All agree that scholars must move past the idea of trying to separate needs from wants, observing that the duality of all goods makes this exercise pointless. The duality of goods states that goods serve both functional and socio-cultural purposes. These socio-cultural purposes are fungible depending upon historical, geographical, and other situational conditions. ²² For example, food and clothing are essential to human survival and yet are two areas of consumption most charged with meaning. Furthermore, the definition of a luxury or a staple, a want (desire) or a need, often changes over time or context. As ¹⁹ For an introduction into the growing class divisions within Mexico City housing, see John Lear, "Mexico City: Space and Class in the Porfirian Capital, 1884-1910," *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 4 (May 1996): 444-492; Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, "1910 Mexico City: Space and Nation in the City of the *Centenario*,"

Journal of Latin American Studies 28, no. 1 (1996): 75-104.

²⁰ For the abundant use of credit by all social classes in the capital city, see Marie François, *A Culture of Everyday Credit: Housekeeping, Pawnbroking, and Governance in Mexico City, 1750-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, in press). See Chapter Three for credit in department stores.

²¹ The following is a select list of monographs, readers, and anthologies on the subject. The most recent consideration of the different approaches to consumption employed by academic disciplines is the Introduction of David

B. Clarke, Marcus A. Doel, and Kate M. L. Housiaux, eds., *The Consumption Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003). Other fine works include: Grant McCracken: *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993); Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Lawrence B. Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender*; and Jennifer Scanlon, ed., *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

22 Clarke, et al., eds., *The Consumption Reader*, 2.

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Chapter One illustrates, during the Porfiriato machine-rolled cigarettes changed dramatically in terms of meaning and availability, much as television in twentieth century America has transformed from a luxury to an expected fixture of every home. Or as one scholar of consumption has remarked, champagne and caviar may be considered desires, but if a sailor is shipwrecked on an island with cases of champagne and caviar, those items quickly become necessary. [23](#) Trying to explain the “why” of consumption, the neoclassical economic model based on a rational, utilitarian *homo economicus* has crumbled from attacks from without and within the field of economics. [24](#) Earlier studies of consumerism focused on social emulation, of matching one’s betters, as the primary purpose of consumption, particularly of conspicuous consumption. This remains a valid approach, but scholars, most vocally anthropologists, have convincingly tempered such an assumption. [25](#) Fresh approaches from the field of economics as well as sociology, anthropology, history, geography, and cultural studies have taken up this issue. [26](#) Given this explosive level

of research in the past quarter century the chances of any unified covering law of consumption seem unlikely.

The reasons behind acts of consumption may be myriad, but the pursuit of personal and national modernity clearly looms prominently in societies of Mexico and Latin America during the half-century preceding World War I. [27](#) Proceeding from this position, this dissertation provides snapshots of consumerism to demonstrate the relationship between consumerism, modernization, culture and society during this period of national development.

To this end, it emphasizes major institutions, changes in material culture and urban ²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-8.

²⁵ One of the earliest and most devastating of these critiques is that of McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*.

²⁶ See the Introduction of Clarke, et al., eds., *The Consumption Reader*, 1-24.

²⁷ For an additional account of the modernizing role of goods in Latin America during this period, see Arnold J.

Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America's Material Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 129-164.

geography, and how goods and the advertising and public language surrounding those goods expressed rapid and fundamental changes to national society.

A brief national history of the nineteenth-century provides insights into why the urge to modernize struck many Mexicans so deeply. From the mid-colonial period, the viceroyalty of New Spain contributed more to the coffers of the Spanish Crown than any other colony largely due to the silver tithe and taxes from the tobacco monopoly. ²⁸ Mexico City, the viceregal capital, was the urban jewel of New World. ²⁹ The struggle for independence plunged much of the colony and subsequent nation into a period of economic decline or stagnation just at a time when Western Europe and the United States began rapid periods of economic, technological, and material advance. Political instability, civil war, and foreign intervention characterized the first half century of nationhood. Struggle for power between anticlerical liberals and proclerical conservatives would eventually lead to the French Intervention of 1862-1867 with the installation of Maximilian as emperor.

One important legacy of Maximilian's court and its splendor was the added impetus it gave to the luxury trade in the capital and the increased appetite it whetted for French goods. ³⁰ As they would throughout much of Mexican history, the consumption of luxury and other modernizing (usually imported) goods helped Mexico's leadership to provide an appearance of modernity and solidarity with leading centres of Western cultural and economic power. Acting as civilized consumers by purchasing imported goods and later high-quality domestic imitations allowed the nation's leading classes to demonstrate their

²⁸ Susan Deans-Smith, *Bureaucrats, Planters, and Workers: The Making of the Tobacco Monopoly in Bourbon Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 7.

²⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, ed. Mary Maples Dunn (New York: Knopf, 1972).

³⁰ This legacy receives scant attention in the historiography. One example is Luis Nicolau d'Olwer, et al., *El Porfiriato: La vida económica*, vol. 8 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed. Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 1123.

membership in that community.” [31](#) Mexican consumers particularly revered French goods in most categories, with exceptions including British fashion for men and German hardware.

Keep in mind that during the nineteenth century France was the global cultural referent and leading consumer society much as the United States is since the mid-twentieth century. Even though political ties between Mexico and France remained frayed after the expulsion of Maximilian in 1867 until an 1883 reconciliation, the French commercial community (whose nucleus pre-dated the Intervention) survived and thrived in Mexico City and in other select cities.

Benito Juárez and the Liberals defeated the French, established the Restored Republic of 1867 to 1876, and tried to restore political and economic order. During this period many of the great retailers of the Porfiriato would either establish or expand their textile and dry goods stores called *almacenes de novedades* patterned on French counterparts. Building on the retail foundations of the Intervention, their stores began to brighten up the central shopping districts grown dingy from decades of neglect. As comparative photos demonstrate, stores raised the skyline of the city centre and incorporated new retail display techniques in their façades and use of larger display windows. In addition to members of the clothing trade, Ernest (or Ernesto) Pugibet—founder of the famous machine-rolled cigarette company El Buen Tono—was among the many other architects of the Porfirian consumer market arriving during this time frame.

By the time Porfirio Díaz maneuvered the overthrow of President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada in 1876 an accelerating consumer culture was already transforming the physical urban space. Enrique Molina, Rector of the Universidad de Concepción in Chile, represented perfectly the mindset of many in Latin America’s leading classes when he declared “We are primitive producers, but we are civilized consumers” at the end of the nineteenth century. Cited in Benjamin Orlove and Arnold J. Bauer, eds., *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 113.

environment and influencing how people experienced notions of human progress sweeping the globe. The Díaz regime facilitated this process by implementing a strategy of rapid economic growth, cultural modernization, and national consolidation. In an interesting paradox, although the Díaz regime emphasized gains in production and sought to attract foreign investment with the promise of low wages, it also stimulated and expanded the internal consumer market. This effort to close the gap between the nation and the centres of modernity (such as Britain, France, the United States, and Germany) mixed elements of national pride, a sense of the Republic's rightful place among the concert of elite nations, and fear of national survival given the recent history of foreign intervention, the growing power of the United States in the north, and the wholesale global colonization scramble consuming European nations. Under the positivist banner of Order and Progress the Díaz regime dealt with the country's defaulted debts to foreign creditors that allowed for a flood of new capital for both public and private enterprises. Government policy changed legislation to promote investment including relaxing restrictions on mining subsoil property rights that allowed for foreign ownership (1884), revamping patent laws, and abolishing internal tariffs (*alcabalas*) that hampered the free flow of goods in the domestic market. Díaz also pushed for investment in new or improved transportation and communication infrastructure crucial for both the development of export and domestic markets. Ports in Veracruz, Mérida, Tampico, and elsewhere were deepened and modernized to facilitate trade³² and an extensive telegraph network developed along with an extensive railway system whose mileage grew from 600 kilometres at the beginning of the Porfiriato to over 19,000 by 1910. Application 32 For Veracruz, see Andrew Grant Wood, *Revolution in the Street: Women, Workers, and Urban Protest in Veracruz, 1870-1927* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources 2001), particularly 1-20; and for Tampico, see Marcial E. Ocasio-Meléndez, "Mexican Urban History:

The Case of Tampico, Tamaulipas, 1876-1924” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1988).

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of the military and the new *Rurales* forces (loosely compared to the Texas Rangers or Royal Canadian Mounted Police) drastically suppressed endemic banditry, long the scourge of travelers and merchants. [33](#) Urban wealth and splendor provided a more attractive target for modern criminals. Improvements to warehouses for imported goods combined with the establishment of *museos comerciales* in the cities better protected imported goods and sought to connect importers with a market of consumers or at least retailers. [34](#) Meanwhile, rapid physical expansion and transformation characterized Mexico City and many other urban areas, especially in the regions of the north, centre, and Yucatán. There, public and private building sprees paralleled public works projects that paved roads, installed networks of electric lighting, telephones, and sewage systems. Together they sought to convert—with mixed results—urban space into islands of modernity. [35](#)

Efforts to culturally modernize Mexicans followed in lockstep with economic modernization. Historians have increasingly focused on this characteristic of Porfirian life. [36](#)

What they have not expressed as explicitly is how this project relied heavily on changing traditional consumption patterns as part of an effort to change one’s manners and morality.

The link between consumption and modernization becomes clear when we consider how [33](#) Paul Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development*, revised and enlarged edition (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1992).

[34](#) The *Museo Comercial* in Mexico City, see *La Semana Mercantil*, Nov. 2, 1885, 501; *La Semana Mercantil*, Oct. 23, 1899, 573-574. On new

warehouses in Veracruz, see *Le Courrier du Mexique*, July 7, 1890, 1.

35 Kuntz Ficker and Connolly, coords., *Ferrocarriles y obras públicas*; Barbara Tenenbaum, “Streetwise History: The Paseo de la Reforma and the Porfirian State, 1876-1910,” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, eds. William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 127-150; Allen Wells and Gilbert M. Joseph,

“Modernizing Visions, *Chilango* Blueprints, and Provincial Growing Pains: Mérida at the Turn of the Century,”

Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos 8, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 167-215.

36 See Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, and William E. French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). To understand how this project reaches back into the colonial period, consult Juan Pedro Viquiera Albán,

¿Relajados o Reprimidos? Diversiones públicas y vida social en la ciudad de México durante el Siglo de las Luces (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), and Pamela Voekel, “Peeing on the Palace: Bodily Resistance to Bourbon Reforms in Mexico City,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 5, no. 2 (June 1992): 183-208.

contemporaries considered cultural progress advanced if individuals switched from: wearing traditional sarapes and going barefoot to shirt, trousers, and at least sandals (preferably shoes); [37](#) drinking pulque to beer; eating corn tortillas to wheat bread; and indulging in gambling or prostitutes to frequenting the theatre or cinema. [38](#) In an editorial on the increased power of acquisition among consumers (*consumidores*), the notoriously

pro-regime newspaper *El Imparcial* supported its argument by observing that Indians were finally covering their traditionally uncovered bodies; that the traditional sarape was giving way to the necessity of clothing, “one of the basic necessities of civilized peoples.” ³⁹ *El Imparcial* was most definitely not a lone voice in making this claim, ⁴⁰ and while its argument may be debatable its language is instructive. To a great extent, to consume modern was to be modern.

Consumption served as a central front in the national cultural struggles. For the *gente decente* and the leadership, Western European and North American consumption patterns should become the uniform national standard within which class and gender hierarchies could be maintained. For many Mexicans, traditional or more often hybrid patterns of consumptions blending modern and earlier forms with their own categories and hierarchies remained or became the norm. Advertisers and large retailers accepted the reality ³⁷ González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: la vida social*, 396-97.

³⁸ The place of beer in Mexico requires future inquiry. Beer was very much a modernizing commodity with a western European pedigree and production in heavily capitalized factories. Commentators regularly compared it favourably to pulque, claimed it ideal for the lower classes, and deemed it a healthy, nutritious drink suitable for all members of the family and capable of reducing the severity of yellow fever. For several examples of all these claims and others toward personal and national betterment, see *El Imparcial*, Feb. 4, 1899, 3; *El Imparcial*, Feb. 8, 1906, 1; *El Imparcial*, May 8, 1907, 6; *El Imparcial*, Dec. 14, 1908, 8; *La Mujer Mexicana*, Mar. 1905, 1; *Actualidades*, Jan. 15, 1909, 15; *Actualidades*, Feb. 26, 1909, 16; *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Oct. 26, 1902, 11; and *La Clase Media*, Aug. 28, 1910, 3.

³⁹ *El Imparcial*, Dec. 6, 1898, 1.

⁴⁰ Auguste Génin in his *Notes Sur Le Mexique* (Mexico City: Imprenta Lacaud, 1908-1910), 108-112, juxtaposes images of various indigenous groups with pictures of department stores.

of a mixed market and fused more traditional imagery and retailing traditions with modern to appeal to a larger consumer base.

Porfirians themselves made abundantly clear in their writings that nothing signaled the process of modernization and the condition of modernity better than consumption and its material culture. Social commentators from across the social spectrum clearly believed this, whether they approved or not. [41](#) The photographic and written record illustrates the ubiquitous practice of employing consumption, its goods, activities, and institutions, as an indicator of national and personal progress. Commemorative albums, national guides, newspaper photos and articles, travellers' accounts and guides, contemporary literature, and official government inaugurations all reveal this. Social commentators such as economist Andrés Molina Enríquez and criminologist Julio Guerrero employed categories of consumption patterns as a major determinant in their social classifications of modern Mexican society and an indicator into the behaviour and moral character of each groups. [42](#)

Porfirians, like their contemporaries around the globe, most certainly celebrated the achievements of production in the economy such as new railroads, factories, ports, smelters, and other indicators of progress. Yet these achievements served as a means to an end: the proof of progress came not in GDP reports, but in the abundance of goods, entertainments, and retailing institutions that reassuringly confirmed the correctness of current political, economic, and social policies. J. Figueroa Domenech states this explicitly in his 800-page *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*: "If the great credit establishments, the important railroads, and the various factories that we have just studied reveal the wealth of 41 The Catholic critique of fashion and increased consumption comes from R.P.V. Marchal, *La Mujer Perfecta*, trans. S.P. Vicens y Marco (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1908).

42 Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (Mexico City: Impr. de A. Carranza e hijos, 1909), especially 227-234; Julio

Guerrero, *La génesis del crimen en México: ensayo de psiquiatria social* (Mexico City: Imprenta de la Vda. de Ch. Bouret, 1901).

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Mexico's soil and the industriousness of its inhabitants, the luxuries and good taste of its retail stores (*casas de comercios*) reveal the culture and civilization of its people." [43](#)

Discussing the increased wants of Mexico and opportunities for American business, the magazine *Modern Mexico* wrote in 1897 "A dozen years ago there was not a plate glass window in San Francisco street; now it is lined with them; and behind them are displayed goods from every part of the world." [44](#) The newspaper *La Semana Mercantil* proudly observed in 1895 that the rows of store windows along the streets of the capital were "radiant with light, where products and articles often worth a fortune were displayed, the most noticeable manifestation of the productive force of our epoch and a lovely and grandiose display of our work and progress." [45](#) Foreign and domestic observers referred to the stores, the plate glass windows, and the advertising as shorthand for the modern cosmopolitanism of Mexico City and the progress made by the nation. [46](#) Many applauded or groused at the increased wants, needs, and expenditures of modern Mexicans. [47](#) They used this voracious consumer appetite to explain increased prices, personal and family financial sacrifices to maintain increased consumption, and of course the inevitable and apparent march of national progress.

Many Porfirians recognized the central role of consumption in their society and economy insofar as they spoke the language of consumption and of its importance to modern 43 J. Figueroa Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: Ramón de S. N. Araluce, 1899), 254.

44 *Modern Mexico*, Jan. 1897, 12.

45 *La Semana Mercantil*, July 1, 1895, 305.

46 William E. Carson, *Mexico: The Wonderland of the South* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1909), 206; and William Henry Bishop, *Old Mexico and Her Lost Provinces* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883).

47 The perceived excesses or demands of modern life in the capital may be found in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Apr.

27, 1902, 1. The article editorializes on the expense and time involved in an urban toilette and social life, listing all the items required and concluding that “urbanity is like the corset, like the English collar, like the cravat of a uniform . . .”

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societies. They spoke of consumption, consumers, the consuming public, [48](#) and even referred to Mexico in the near future becoming a “consuming people” (*pueblo consumidor*). [49](#) They proclaimed that the great interests of nations is to assure consumers for their production, [50](#)

talked of establishing direct relations between the producer and the consumer, [51](#) and observed the rewards of tending to the tastes, needs, and demands of consumers. [52](#) Internationalist debates over the nature and importance of consumption reached local presses. Discussions included the role of consumption in national development, the latest manifestation of a longstanding argument seeking to distinguish “productive” from “unproductive”

consumption. [53](#) When textile industrialists mentioned the possibility of reducing production in Puebla they were met by protests not just by workers but leading businessmen who declared that such a move would be disastrous for commerce as workers would have less to spend at their establishments. [54](#) Mainstream newspaper editorials from 1877 proposed

that raising wages would benefit agriculture, commerce, and industry by providing workers with the means by which to purchase more of their products. ⁵⁵ Many evidently understood that their economy was based on both production and consumption. While this consumerist language may not have carried the day in determining macro-economic government policy it appears to have staked a prominent place in both the language of the business community and the public at large.

48 *El Imparcial*, Dec. 2, 1902, 1.

49 *El Avisador Comercial*, May 12, 1889, 2.

50 *La Semana Mercantil*, Apr. 10, 1893, 175.

51 *La Semana Mercantil*, Mar. 9, 1891, 114.

52 *El Economista Mexicano*, Feb. 21, 1891, 31.

53 *El Imparcial*, Aug. 24, 1900, 1, condenses the latest argument of economist J. B. Say who favoured an utilitarian economic approach to consumption which frowned upon luxury consumption and favoured consumption that benefited major domestic industries. For perhaps the earliest and most famous entrant into this debate read Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, published in 1714. For an analysis of Mandeville and other participants in this debate, see Roger Mason, *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption: Theory and Thought Since 1700* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1998).

54 *Le Mexique*, Oct. 5, 1908, 276.

55 *La Victoria*, May 29, 1877, 1.

Studying the modernization process in Mexico is not new. Quantifying economic development during the Porfiriato and debating its merits and legacy anchors much of the historiography of the era. ⁵⁶ Contributors to this endeavour have considered how federal governments have, with varying degrees of success, pursued this end through fiscal, patronage, educational, and other policies. Social histories have reconstructed the impact of these political and economic developments. These histories weigh heavily towards presenting the costs of modernization, emphasizing agrarian dislocation, labour exploitation, and urban discontent. ⁵⁷ Whether economic, political, or social, the received narrative of most studies of the Porfiriato has tended to search for causative factors of the Revolution of 1910. In approaching this era as a mere precursor to the Revolution, consciously or not most studies have created a narrative wherein the reader is always waiting for the other shoe to drop. This historiographical formula has limited both the range and interpretation of subject areas.

Over the past fifteen years, the Porfiriato has undergone something of a renaissance in both academic studies and popular culture. ⁵⁸ In Mexico, the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the crumbling of the PRI political domination (and influence over academic patronage ⁵⁶ This historiography includes: Coatsworth, *Growth Against Development*; Kuntz Ficker, *Empresa extranjera y mercado interno*; François-Xavier Guerra, *Le Mexique: De l'ancien régime à la révolution*, 2vols. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985); John Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Mary Kay Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico. 1880-1928* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1982); Mark Wasserman, *Capitalists, Caciques, and Revolution: the Native Elite and Foreign Enterprise in Chihuahua, Mexico, 1854-1911* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

⁵⁷ Rodney D. Anderson, *Outcasts in Their Own Land: Mexican Industrial Workers, 1906-1911* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976); John Hart, *Los anarquistas mexicanos, 1860-1900* (Mexico City: SepSetentas, 1974); Jean Meyer, *Problemas campesinos y revueltas agrarias, 1821-1910* (Mexico City: SepSetentas, 1973); John Tutino, *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence*,

1750-1940 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Alan Knight , *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

58 Steven B. Bunker and William H. Beezley, “Porfiriato: Interpretations,” in *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society and Culture*, 2 vols., ed. Michael S. Werner (Chicago: Dearborn Publishers, 1997): 1169-1173; Paul Garner, *Porfirio Díaz* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 1-15.

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and output) in the 1990s, and the sheer fact of historical distance have all contributed to a renewed popular interest in the Porfiriato and a reassessment—if not occasionally a gloss-over—of the decidedly negative interpretation that for eight decades has characterized the official account of the Porfirian regime. [59](#) In academia, historians have fiercely debated the question of how revolutionary was the Revolution. [60](#) Opening new investigative space, this debate has contributed to a reassessment of the traditional periodization of the nation’s history defined by political events (e.g. the rule of Porfirio Díaz or the start of the Revolution). As a result, a host of studies has explored the continuities between the Porfiriato and the eras preceding and following it. Most notable among these studies is the broader trend of interpreting modernization as a fundamental process operating at a level far deeper and more insistent than the whim of the transient political leadership. Historians now view modernization not only as a continuum stretching back to the Bourbon era of the colonial period through to present day but also as a cultural as well as an economic and political process.

Cultural history stands out as the most remarkable product and contributor to this renaissance. Once overshadowed by political, economic, and social histories, cultural histories of the Porfiriato have drawn upon and adapted the theories, research, and credibility (also fashion, some may churlishly say) of the field in European and North American history to stake a

prominent claim in the historiography. Often cited as the seminal work in Porfirian cultural history, William Beezley's *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* published in 1988 viewed the deep rifts in Porfirian society as more cultural than economic in origin. Over the past decade and a half, he and a growing number of other 59 On popular culture, see the 1992 telenovela on the Porfirian elite, *El vuelo de aguila*, and Enrique Krauze, *Porfirio Díaz: Místico de la autoridad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987).

60 Alan Knight, "Mexican Revolution: Interpretations," in *Encyclopedia of Mexico*, 869-873.

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cultural historians have demonstrated that efforts to culturally modernize the population—

changing the way Mexicans ate, dressed, behaved, amused themselves, and viewed the world—were linked inextricably to economic development and political centralization from the late colonial period through the twentieth century. [61](#) At the same time, Mexican and specifically Porfirian cultural histories have incorporated European theories of modernity. [62](#)

By focusing on modernity as a condition or state rather than on modernization as a process, these historians are seeking to understand *what* is changing in a modernizing society, but also *how* people understood those changes, their place within, and their role in these changes. [63](#)

In short, historians of modernity try to explain what it meant for their subjects to be modern.

What remains absent in Porfirian historiography is any study on consumption. More broadly, the historiography of Latin America offers only a small body of work dealing with the topic. Only four published

studies in English link consumerism to the modernization process in Porfirian Mexico; the first is an article on the northern cities of Monterrey and Chihuahua; the second on elite conspicuous consumption in Guadalajara; the third on Casa Boker, the German hardware department store from 1865 to the present; and the fourth concentrates exclusively on goods and surveys all of Latin America from the colonial period to the present day. ⁶⁴ Other English works, such as those of Julio Moreno, Eric Zolov, and 61 French, *A Peaceful and Working People*; Viquiera Albán, *¿Relajados o Reprimidos? Diversiones públicas y vida social en la ciudad de México*; Voekel, “Peeing on the Palace”; William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, eds., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994); Robert Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); and Pablo Piccato, *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), among others.

62 Introduction to the concept of modernity is Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson, eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

63 Robert M. Buffington and William E. French, “The Culture of Modernity,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

64 Steven B. Bunker, “‘Consumers of Good Taste:’ Marketing Modernity in Northern Mexico, 1890-1910,”

Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos 13, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 227-269; William H. Beezley, “The Porfirian Smart Set Anticipates Thorstein Veblen in Guadalajara,” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance*, 173-190; Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*; and Bauer, *Goods, Power, History*.

Anne Rubenstein, have studied aspects of consumerism much later in the twentieth century. [65](#)

Throughout the rest of Latin America studies are limited. [66](#) Works published in Spanish also remain limited but are growing, thanks in particular to the work conducted at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas at the UNAM. [67](#) Although changing, much of this work remains more descriptive than analytical or mired in a strict Marxist framework emphasizing economic exploitation, mass deception, and generally implying an elite hegemonic project.

The recognition of consumption as a category of analysis has had to overcome a number of biases. First is the Porfirian Black Legend⁶⁸ that has simplified and narrowed consumerism into a pursuit by and for the elite. Criticism of the leadership nearly always involves detailed examples of conspicuous consumption. On the flip side of this class analysis of the revolution, the promulgators of the revolution, whether rural or urban working class, are constructed as free of the taint of effeminate consumerism, particularly of imported—and therefore not nationalistic—consumer goods. Furthermore, there is an element in revolutionary mythology of a rural-urban divide. In this socio-historical memory, the cities—particularly the capital, Mexico City—had become tainted and lost their virility ⁶⁵ Julio E. Moreno, *Yankee Don't Go Home!: Mexican Nationalism, American Business Culture, and the Shaping of Modern Mexico, 1920-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

⁶⁶ One of the earliest works considering modernizing material culture and national identity in a Latin American society is Jeffrey D. Needell, *A Tropical Belle Epoque: Elite Culture and Turn-of-the-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁶⁷ Nora Pérez Rayon, “La publicidad en México a fines del siglo XIX: Expresión del Progreso económico y la modernidad porfirista, transmisora de nuevos valores y modelos culturales,” *Sociológica* 9, no. 1 (September-

December 1994): 195-226; Berta Tello Peón, “Intención decorativo en los objetos de uso cotidiano de los interiors domésticos del Porfiriato,” in *El Arte y la vida cotidiana*, ed. Elena Estrada de Gerleso (Mexico City: UNAM Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1995), 139-154; Thelma Camacho Morfín, *Imágenes de México: Las historietas de El Buen Tono de Juan B. Urrutia, 1909-1912* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2002); Julieta Ortiz Gaitán, *Imágenes del deseo: Arte y publicidad en la prensa ilustrada Mexicana (1894-1939)* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003); and *México, ¿quieres tomarte una foto conmigo? Cien años de consumo* (Mexico City: PROFECO / Editorial Gustavo Casasola, 1996).

68 Benjamin Keen, “The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 49 (November 1969): 703-719.

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due to their embrace of foreign influence, luxury, and consumption. They required the cleansing of rural agrarian Mexico, the true and pure Mexico that had supposedly remained free of foreign material or intellectual influence. Consumption patterns became an important means by which postrevolutionary mythologies declared the elite unfit to rule. [69](#) As a result, understanding the significance of consumerism in mediating modernization and modernity at all levels of Porfirian society became taboo after the revolution. A second obstacle is the legacy of dependency theory, its emphasis on the export side of the economy, and the short shrift given to the study of imports and a developing internal market. [70](#) This ties into the assumption that modern consumption patterns do not occur in countries that have not undergone an industrial revolution. Historians have long fallen into accepting a pattern that supply leads demand, that the Industrial Revolution provided the goods that led to a consumer revolution in the twentieth century. This is the third hindrance that reaches far beyond the study of Porfirian Mexico; a subtle but insistent romanticization of production over consumption has infused industrial societies, whether in the

theories of classical economics or the writings of Karl Marx. [71](#) Historians need to reconsider consumption not just as a manifestation of other processes but one deserving of study on its own.

Scholars of Western Europe and North America lead in this effort. They have the advantage of greater numbers, easier access to a greater number of sources, and, of course, 69 Adolfo Gilly, ed., *Interpretaciones de la Revolución Mexicana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980). Additional reinforcement of this view comes from González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: la vida social*; and Juan Felipe Leal, “El Estado y el Bloque en el Poder, 1867-1914,” *Historia Mexicana* 23, no. 4 (April-June 1974): 700-721.

70 D. C. M. Platt, “Dependency in Nineteenth-Century Latin America: A Historian Objects,” *Latin American Research Review* 15, no. 1 (1980): 113-130. Exceptions most definitely exist, including Orlove and Bauer, eds., *The Allure of the Foreign*; and Cerutti, *Burguesía, capitales e industria*.

71 For a direct engagement with this issue, see Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture, and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade Before the Factory, 1660-1800* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); and the collection of essays within Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods* 24

studying the centers of global consumerism. Nevertheless, the field is still in its adolescence.

Often cited as the first major study is *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* published in 1982 by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb. [72](#) A year earlier, Michael Miller revolutionized histories of retail institutions with his enduring study of the Bon Marché in 1981. More than just a history of a store, Miller located the Bon Marché within a transforming French society, economy, and culture. [73](#) Histories of consumption have begun to fill a wide-open field, ranging from histories of institutions, advertising, literacy, fashion,

and specific goods to the intersection of consumerism with modernity on such issues as family structures, courtship, and a constellation of other subjects. ⁷⁴ One of the most prominent debates surrounds the issue of a consumer culture take-off point. Except in textbooks, gone are the descriptions of 1920s America as the start of a consumer culture. Several scholars are now convincingly arguing for Renaissance Italy as a start point. ⁷⁵ Most consumer historians still view Early Modern Europe, meaning the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. ⁷⁶ A growing consensus breaks down the history of consumerism into a number of stages of which the Industrial

72 Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

73 Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

74 See footnote 22 and Mary Louise Roberts, "Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 817-844; and Peter Stearns, "Stages of Consumerism: Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization," *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (March 1997): 102-117.

75 Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996).

Jardine's use of artwork in this project is both provocative and beautiful. Simon Schama combines Clifford Geertz's approach of "thick description" with Dutch art in masterful analysis of Dutch "Golden Age" anxieties and the central role of goods and abundance. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

76 The classic work is Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985). Also see Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer*; Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology*

of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) provide two more recent additions.

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Revolution and mechanization is far from its inception point. [77](#) In this conception a market driven by demand—whether spices from India, porcelain from China, or tobacco and sugar from the New World—provided for the accumulation of capital that led to the Industrial Revolution and yet another stage of western societies increasing investing themselves and their view of their world into their world of goods with which they surrounded themselves.

If Mexican and Latin American history has barely touched the subject of consumption, neither has the history of consumption made inroads into Mexico or Latin America. A common lament from historians of consumption is the lack of studies produced in areas beyond Western Europe and North America. [78](#) Scholars such as Christine Ruane, Timothy Burke, and Jeremy Prestholdt have published excellent works on Russia, Zimbabwe, and East Africa but at this time the bulk of extant studies refer to non-North Atlantic societies mostly as sources of goods destined for core consumer markets and have not explored the impact of European goods on peripheral societies. [79](#)

This dissertation, therefore, seeks to fill a void in both the historiographies of Mexico and of consumption. It is not a deconstruction of advertising nor a diatribe against—or paean to—the capitalist system. Instead, it intends to analyze consumption as an historical process in the context of changes within the broader Mexican culture and society. In so doing, it illuminates

how aspects of consumption conveyed and shaped the modernizing culture in which Porfirian Mexicans lived. When possible it seeks to demonstrate how individuals, groups, and organizations engaged this culture of consumption to construct individual and 77 Stearns, "Stages of Consumerism."

78 *Ibid.*, 117.

79 Christine Ruane, "Clothes Shopping in Imperial Russia: The Development of a Consumer Culture," *Journal of Social History* 28 (Summer 1995): 765-782; Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and Jeremy Prestholdt, "On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism," *American Historical Review* 109, no.

3 (June 2004): 755-781. A synthesis just published is Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2006).

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group identities, interpret and shape public language and understanding of rapid social, cultural and economic change, and, of course, benefit financially from a society increasingly reliant upon goods to communicate social and cultural categories. Although set in Mexico it is a case study of a much larger global process. The relationship between consumption and modernization begins long before the Porfiriato and continues long after, but for purposes of manageability I have limited myself to this period while occasionally spilling over its borders. Unlike any other period, the Porfiriato represented an unrivalled moment where an unshaken faith in human progress wedded with the technological capacity to make it a physical reality. Finally, this study limits itself to five snapshots of Porfirian

consumption, all of which share the unifying theme of connecting consumption, culture, and the modernization of Mexico.

Chapter One focuses on the manufacture and marketing of a single commodity: machine-rolled cigarettes. This chapter traces the mechanization and consolidation of the tobacco industry into three leading firms dominated by the Buen Tono Company. Publicity spectacles and marketing strategies reveal not only the links between consumption, spectacle, and modernity, but also how even at this point the search for a mass market required the application of niche marketing strategies. Emphasis throughout remains on the changing meaning that society ascribed to the cigarette and how changes in technology, business organization, and cultural perceptions turned the once lowly cigarette into a symbol of national progress.

Chapter Two shifts to advertising, the language of consumption. A brief history of advertising prior to the Porfiriato leads to a larger discussion of both the forms of publicity and the discourse of modernity found in both the product as well as the producers of 27

advertising. The tone of this chapter seeks to balance that of Chapter One by emphasizing the decentralized production of meaning within Porfirian advertising. It does so most clearly by personalizing the job of advertising space brokers as well as investigating advertising patents and revealing both the ideas and voices of applicants. Next, the chapter moves to new technologies and the rise of the advertising revenue-driven mass-circulation press in the expansion of the discourse of consumption. The two most important of these developments were the refinement of lithography and the ascent of Rafael Reyes Spindola as creator of the mass-circulation newspaper. Finally, stepping back from the homogenizing tendency often attributed to Reyes Spindola, the chapter considers the variety of press and the four distinct modernizing visions contained within: gente decente; Catholic; hedonistic; and urban working class. A common embrace of modernity and concern for the security of person and property links these visions.

Chapters Three and Four highlight the greatest institutional symbol of modern consumer culture: the department store. An expanding historiography on this subject elsewhere in North America and Europe allows for illuminating transnational comparisons.

In analyzing department stores and a broader evolution of retailing in Mexico City the chapter provides a wealth of data on a much-commented upon but little studied phenomenon of Porfirian urban life. Additionally, it identifies and corrects a number of misconceptions about these stores including the source of their goods and customer base. It does so as it outlines the origins, ownership, organization, financial success, and clientele of the stores.

Department store owners—from Aristide Boucicault of the Bon Marché in Paris to the Tron family of the Palacio de Hierro in Mexico—had always trumpeted the democratization of luxury that their institutions brought to the mass of consumers. How Mexican stores 28

interpreted this democratization and took on a larger cultural role as promoters of constant innovation and progress receives consideration. Finally, the chapter looks at how these stores and their magnificent buildings were part of a steady visual transformation of central urban Mexico City into a secular commercial zone, a transformation in which private capital took on a leadership role.

Chapters Five and Six move away from more traditional manners of viewing consumption. Here, store crime and the public discourse on crime provide another angle to consider the impact of department stores, consumption, and the meaning of goods upon Porfirian society. Together, the chapters help probe how the Porfirian motto of “Order and Progress” and its emphasis on the security of both person and property is a necessary precondition for any modern consumer society. Both chapters illustrate how property theft and thieves increasingly dominated discussions of crime and how a growing perception of their visibility found expression in a discourse of crime characterized by a transatlantic belief in a shift from violent to property crime in modernizing societies. Chapter Five considers department

store crime generally, beginning with observations on the nature of department store shoplifting before moving on to other forms of property crime committed in these establishments. It concludes with an account of the pre-existing Mexican model of criminality and its modification as Porfirians view the modernization of crime occurring in lockstep with that of the larger society. From this platform, Chapter Six offers the La Profesa jewelry store robbery-homicide as an early case study of this phenomenon and provides a more intimate account of the changes that modernization, consumption, and crime brought about in the daily life of residents in the capital.

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In the beginning of his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez expresses the intertwined fascination of goods, technology, and modernity held by many Latin Americans in an unspecified time period, probably in the last half of the nineteenth century, and in any case not too far off that of the Porfiriato. [80](#) In the first 40

pages he recounts the powerful ideas and goods brought by a ragged family of gypsies who set up camp every year outside the small, isolated community of Macondo. He constructs the triangular relationship of the indefatigably curious José Arcadio Buendía, his wife Úrsula, and the old gypsy Melquíades. The showman Melquíades spun tales of international travel and a magnificent material culture as he introduced inventions such as magnets, telescopes, and other articles of much larger world that fired the imagination of Buendía. Through the carnivalesque filter of Melquíades and subsequent gypsy peddlers, Buendía and his village are introduced to the scientific wonders of progress sweeping the nineteenth-century world.

For years, Buendía acquired these goods at considerable cost in the hopes of adapting them to aims such as finding gold (the magnets) and military

purposes (the telescope, for solar warfare), all with the aim of somehow finding this seemingly fantastic world beyond his *patria chica*. Buendía does not find an escape route to this modern world despite all of his efforts. Interestingly, García Márquez leaves this feat not to the man but to the woman, Úrsula, who instead *brings* this world to the village after disappearing for five months. She returns “exalted, rejuvenated, with new clothes in a style that was unknown in the village.” [81](#)

She introduces Buendía to the crowd she has brought with her, “men and women like them. .

. They had mules loaded down with things to eat, oxcarts with furniture and domestic utensils, pure and simple earthly accessories put on sale without any fuss by peddlers of 80 Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Alfred A.

Knopf, 1998).

81 *Ibid.*, 40.

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everyday reality.” Although they had never made contact before, they lived only two days away, in towns that received mail every month in the year and “where they were familiar with the implements of good living.” Earlier, Buendía had declared to his wife that

“incredible things are happening in this world.” [82](#) Perhaps in a significant caveat for this dissertation and for understanding deep changes in human daily lives, García Márquez points out that Buendía did not find these “incredible things” in his search for great inventions.

Rather, the source of potentially revolutionary change was Úrsula (the consumer?) who brought modernity to her village and her village into the

nation and modern world through an abundance of cheap and useful goods, the “implements of daily living.”

At its heart, this dissertation seeks to introduce the ways in which goods and consumption helped to materialize notions of modernity in the time of Porfirio Díaz, how they provided proof, both big and small, for the beliefs of many Mexicans that “incredible things are happening in this world.”

82 *Ibid.*, 12.

Chapter One

Personalized Progress:

The Production and Marketing of the Machine-Rolled Cigarette

On Christmas Eve of 1907 Madame Calvé came to town. Never one to miss out on free publicity, the famous French opera singer visited one of the largest stages the Republic had to offer: the Buen Tono cigarette factory in Mexico City. On the invitation of the General Director, Ernesto Pugibet, Madame Calvé toured the modern industrial facility that symbolized all that Mexico's leaders wanted their nation to be. Stepping out of her automobile she met the warm applause and proffered flowers of top government officials, factory directors, and 2000 neatly dressed workers. Above the assembly towered the Longines clock, imported from Switzerland along with its mission of instilling in industrial workers the time discipline of a modern labour force. Entering the factory, Madame Calvé toured the main shop floor where young women dressed in white smocks and sashes in the national colours attended to the 200 high-speed French machines that rolled and cut over 3.5

billion cigarettes each year. Continuing on, she proceeded through "Porfirio Díaz"

corridor—the long, marble-floored spine of the factory—to inspect the connecting work areas. After admiring the modern lithographic presses, opulent administrative offices, vast tobacco warehouses and other

departments, the delegation concluded the tour by settling down to a champagne lunch in the magnificent boardroom. Here, Pugibet announced that his lithographers would print all of the posters, programs, and handbills promoting Madame Calvé's Mexican tour. Moreover, he presented Madame Calvé with a new brand of cigarettes named after the grand Dame herself as a commemoration of her visit.

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Covered by the major newspapers the performance proved a public relations success for Buen Tono, Madame Calvé, and the development program of the Díaz regime. Upon making her farewell, Madame Calvé promised to return the next day in her costume of *Carmen* for portraits with both workers and high officials. As an experienced performer in the world of spectacle and appearances, Madame Calvé recognized the stage set—and the leading role played—by Buen Tono in the Porfirian drama of modernizing Mexico.

This chapter examines how a single commodity, the machine-rolled cigarette, became perhaps the most widely identified symbol of Mexican economic and cultural progress during the Porfiriato. It first traces the mechanization and consolidation of the tobacco industry into three leading firms dominated by the Buen Tono cigarette company. An important component in this process was the close personal and economic relationships between the leadership of the companies and those of the Porfirian government. With these changes the cigarette more than any other mass-consumed commodity became industrially produced and remarkably

cheap, a highly visible and accessible benefit derived from the Porfirian economic development program.

While the considerable gains in production were essential to the ubiquitous presence of machine-rolled cigarettes in Mexico, it was the sensational promotional campaigns mounted by the big three companies that lashed the once-lowly cigarette to widespread notions of individual and national progress. For this reason the bulk of the chapter focuses on the marketing of cigarettes. On permanent and impromptu urban stages company advertisers reinforced the association of consumption, spectacle, and modernity as they displayed the newest technological wonders. Their campaigns illuminate one particularly effective method by which the Porfirian modernization vision reached and influenced a mass 33

audience: through the advertisement of their products and the association of cigarettes with the modern world. In concert with other commercial interests, elite social initiatives, and state public works projects, cigarette companies such as Buen Tono conjured up their interpretation of a modern, cosmopolitan and consuming Mexico.

The marketing strategies of the big cigarette companies reveal that they did not confuse a mass market with a homogenous market. Mass marketing required niche marketing and the cigarette companies differentiated their products by class, gender, and other distinctions that mirrored the everyday segmentation and rankings that characterized Porfirian society. At the same time as this advertising reinforced contemporary hierarchies its language provided a new, unifying category of identity for Mexicans: that of consumer.

As consumers, all Mexicans could partake not only in common commodified experiences but also experience the material benefits of national progress and find new empowerment in the market not through their acts of production but through those of consumption.

Tobacco as a commodity has a long history in Mexico. Pre-Columbian societies harvested, dried, and traded tobacco leaf. With the arrival of the

Spaniards, the two societies swapped narcotic addictions—tobacco for liquor—that would plague each society for centuries. During the colonial period, Mexicans ingested tobacco by smoking it in cigars, cigarettes, and pipes, snorting it as snuff, and—mostly for Indian labourers—chewing it with lime juice (*pisiete*) much in the same way as Andean cultures chewed coca leaves for endurance. Cigarette manufacturing arrived relatively late in Mexico, reputedly invented in the early eighteenth century by Antonio Charro who rolled and sold cigarettes to theatre-goers outside of the Teatro de Comedias in Mexico City. By the late colonial period, cigars and cigarettes by far dominated consumption patterns comprising over 90% of tobacco 34

monopoly sales. [83](#) From 1768 until 1810 tobacco production, manufacture, and retail became a monopoly under the Bourbon reforms. Sale of tobacco products became the second largest revenue source for the colonial government exceeded only by the silver tithe. [84](#) The War of Independence resulted in the destruction of the monopoly, a decentralization of the industry, and a decline in crop yields as the impact of the war took its toll.

From the perspective of consumption, the war of independence, political fratricide, and economic instability during the decades from 1810 through the early Porfiriato never diminished the love of tobacco by Mexican consumers regardless of their class or gender.

One senior colonial bureaucrat had noted that “a Mexican would forsake a tortilla for a cigarette,” a sentiment shared by a number of foreign observers over the next half century. In 1822, United States ambassador to Mexico Joel Poinsett expressed surprise at the popularity of smoking among both sexes when he observed “several young ladies, pretty and well-dressed, smoking cigars . . . the Mexican gentlemen do not seem to dislike it and the tale of love is whispered and vows of fidelity are interchanged amidst volumes of smoke.” [85](#) Two decades later, Fanny Calderón de la Barca peppered her memoir with accounts of both sexes smoking, whether cigarettes after breakfast or cigars with hot punch after an evening of

diversions. ⁸⁶ Besides capturing the attention of foreign observers, tobacco assumed a prominent position in the literature and iconography of the new nation. ⁸⁷ When viewed ⁸³ The finest and most comprehensive study of the colonial tobacco monopoly is Susan Deans-Smith, *Bureaucrats, Planters, and Workers: The Making of the Tobacco Monopoly in Bourbon Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992). It includes information on Antonio Charro and the predominance of cigarettes and cigars, 12 and 149-152.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Bureaucrats, Planters*, 7.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

⁸⁶ Fanny Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico During a Residence of Two Years in That Country* (London: E.P.

Dutton & Co., 1917), 33, 55.

⁸⁷ Ignacio Cumplido, ed., *El álbum mexicano*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Imp. de Ignacio Cumplido, 1849) includes a comprehensive essay on the history of tobacco in Mexico accompanied by a full-page colour lithograph showing the various implements used to smoke the plants. *Los mexicanos: pintados por si mismos* (Mexico 35

cumulatively, these and other works and social commentaries provide the observer with the distinct impression that tobacco was both a staple consumer commodity long before the Porfiriato as well as essential to Mexican social customs and material culture.

During the Porfiriato and particularly after 1890, new economic and cultural trends transformed the place and significance of this already-established consumer commodity.

After 1880 tobacco cultivation burgeoned and quality improved with the opening up of new growing areas and an infusion of new capital and horticultural techniques. Crop yields spiked from 7,116 tons in 1892 to nearly 11,000 tons three years later and continued to increase rapidly before peaking in 1905. ⁸⁸ Tobacco elaboration rapidly escalated after stagnating in the first decade and a half of the Porfirian regime. The most important cause of this change came during the mid-1880s and early 1890s when the French entrepreneur Ernesto Pugibet took advantage of new Mexican incorporation laws, foreign technology, and available investment capital to lead the modernization, mechanization, and concentration of the cigarette industry. The steady development of a comprehensive rail network combined with the abolition of the *alcabalas* or internal tariffs further expanded the potential market reach of centralized mass producers. National production swelled from 328 million cigarette packets in 1898 to 493 million in 1910. ⁸⁹ These changes in tobacco production harmonized City: Casa de M. Murguía, portal del Aguila de oro, 1853) illustrates an assortment of Mexican occupations and popular characters. These now-classic images of popular culture demonstrate the omnipresence of tobacco in Mexican daily life with representations of not only of consumers like the China Poblana but also retailers such as “La cajista.” Luis G. Inclán, *Astucia: el jefe de los hermanos de la hoja; ó, Los charros contrabandistas de la rama* (Mexico City: Librería de la vda. de Ch. Bouret, 1908). Writing in 1865 during the French occupation, Inclán romanticized the incessant conflict between larger, state-sanctioned growers and manufacturers and small-scale farmers and rollers that marked the tobacco industry from the Bourbons through the Porfiriato.

Elaborating upon the above citations is Maria Concepción Amerlinck, *Historia y cultura del tabaco en México* (Mexico City: Tabacos Mexicanos, S.A. de C.V., 1988), 189-190.

⁸⁸ Luis Nicolau d’Olwer, et al., *El Porfiriato: La vida económica*, vol. 7 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed.

Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 82-84.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 362-363. Stephen H. Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University

Press, 1989), 51, 99. For the Porfirian conditions that favoured import substitution and helped provide a stable, supportive business environment for aggressive companies like Buen 36

with changes in consumer demand. The most notable and obvious change during the Porfiriato was the dominance achieved by the machine-rolled cigarette over any other tobacco form. From an economic perspective, cigarettes lent themselves more easily to mechanical production than did cigars, resulting in prices falling to less than 5 centavos a pack while improving the quality of the product by removing glue and other impurities through the adoption of adhesive-free rolling machinery. The impact of these tangible economic changes harmonized with important symbolic and social considerations. Machine-rolled cigarettes—created by the latest technology in large, modern, heavily capitalized factories—captured the spirit of progress sweeping Porfirian Mexico unlike cigar, pipe, or chewing tobacco, much in the same way that factory-produced beer made inroads into the pulque market. At the same time Mexican society steadily urbanized. In these metropolitan islands surrounded by traditional, rural Mexico, city goers of all classes found that cigarettes better fit the faster pace and social etiquette of the urban social world than did messier and more leisurely-smoked cigars or pipes. Finally, the potential of a national mass market and concerns of overproduction spurred cigarette manufacturers to launch well-financed marketing campaigns which deftly incorporated these economic, cultural, and social changes into their advertising. The domination of the cigarette over the cigar may be found not only in print media but also in consumption statistics: domestic cigarette consumption nearly quintupled within the first 20 years of the Porfiriato and nearly tripled again between 1898

and 1910, cigar consumption tumbled from 110 million to 76 million during the same period. [90](#)

Tono, see Edward Beatty, *Institutions and Investment: The Political Basis of Industrialization in Mexico Before 1911* (Stanford: Stanford University

Press, 2001), particularly 46-48 on incorporation laws.

90 d'Olwer et al., *El Porfiriato: La vida económica*, 362-363.

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By the Revolution, cigarette consumption and etiquette permeated nearly every aspect of public and private life. A department store salesman would “measure off a yard of cloth or fit you with new collars between puffs of his cigarette.” [91](#) Mexican elites would typically conclude dinner with cigarettes—not cigars—and coffee while newspaper advice columnists counselled young women to buy their *novios* an elegant cigarette holder. [92](#) Percy Martin expressed his annoyance that smoking had so thoroughly penetrated social etiquette; he observed how cigarette paraphernalia had become a stylish gift, and when two acquaintances meet one would invariably offer his cigarette case “and it is considered impolitic to refuse, even if one be a non-smoker.” [93](#) Martin then went on to echo travellers who had noted that Mexicans rarely bothered to buy unrolled tobacco since “cigarettes are so cheap that few take the trouble to make their own.” After writing extensively on the topic of tobacco in Mexican life Martin astutely summarized the change in consumer tastes and the essential nature of the cigarette in Mexican society. As for the once-popular habit of pipe-smoking, Martin pointed out that “one sees but very few pipes in use, though occasionally perhaps among some old Indian man or woman. The cigarette is universal.”

Foundations of Success: Ernesto Pugibet and the Porfirian Tobacco Industry

During the 1880s the tobacco industry initiated a number of changes that presaged larger economic trends in the Porfirian economy. Specifically, the sector industrialized as new investment and technology from home and abroad brought new machinery, larger shop sizes and increasing demands on workers both inside and outside the modernized factories.

91 W. E. Carson, *Mexico: The Wonderland of the South* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), 65.

92 Carson, *Mexico*, 124; *El Mundo Ilustrado*, March 20, 1900.

93 Percy F. Martin, *Mexico of the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1 (London: Edward Arnold, 1907), 197.

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The greatest change occurred with the installation of cigarette rolling machinery in factories such as El Buen Tono despite significant opposition.

Attempts to mechanize production began nearly a century before the Porfiriato but failed due to both economic and social considerations. Colonial tobacco monopoly bureaucrats during the late Bourbon period had considered then discarded the idea after factoring in the high cost of machinery compared to the available cheap labour, worker opposition, and fears of colonial administrators that the resulting job losses from increased productivity would be politically inexpedient. Not until 1884 would the Mexico City tobacco firm El Modelo introduce the first rolling machines. It soon installed three different imported makes: Bonsack; Winston; and Comas. With little delay, French technology arrived in 1885

when Ernesto Pugibet and Luis Josselin patented a rolling machine on behalf of Buen Tono. [94](#)

With the advent of this machinery, public controversy intensified over the social issues of child labour, maltreatment of the predominantly female workforce, and the constant pressure of factory owners on workers to increase their productivity. [95](#) The professed sensitivity of factory owners to these issues not only infused their public relations battles in the press, but also seasoned the language used in their patent applications. For example, Josselin and Pugibet differentiated their invention from those already in use by claiming that theirs possessed advantages greater than competitors, primarily that it “did not disturb the operator in her work, a significant advance over those machines presently employed.”

94 J. Figueroa Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: Ramón de S. N. Araluce, 1899), 186; Caja 46, exp. 1788, 19th Century, Nov. 11, 1885 (maquina para encajillar cigarros de papel), Patentes y Marcas (Gris), Grupo Documental 218, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter cited as AGN).

95 Moisés González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, vol. 4 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed. Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 294-297. For a selection of articles concerning new machinery, wages and work conditions of female cigarette employees consider: *La Semana en el Hogar*, July 29, 1895, 1-2; Aug. 5, 1895, 1-2; *El Imparcial*, Oct. 17, 1900, 1; *La Clase Media*, Nov. 21, 1909, 3.

Productivity soared with the new machinery, a fact that helps to explain why factory owners disregarded a government dictate in the early 1880s limiting daily workloads from 2600 to 2185 cigarettes per worker and instead increased the number to 3200 in certain cases. [96](#)

Increased mechanization signaled to traditional artisan workshops that their days were numbered, yet the quantity of factory jobs created in the consolidating industry exceeded the number of positions lost in traditional shops. Mexico City's "Big Three" tobacco companies routinely recruited female employees throughout the country in advertisements placed in local newspapers. ⁹⁷ Overall, when viewed from the perspective that tobacco and textiles were the only economic sectors engaged in relatively large-scale manufacturing prior to the Porfiriato, this modernization and expansion of such a critical industry marked a significant development in both the Porfirian economy and industrial policy. ⁹⁸

The undisputed leader in this change was the Buen Tono cigarette company established and fostered by French-born Ernest (or Ernesto, as he was better known in his adopted homeland) Pugibet. Pugibet would eventually out-invest, outspend, and outmaneuver his competitors as Buen Tono became a *de facto* monopoly. Although Pugibet derived much of his national reputation as an influential entrepreneur and self-made man from his association with Buen Tono he also participated actively in other sectors of the Mexican and international economy. ⁹⁹ Throughout the last two decades of the Porfirian 96 González Navarro, *La vida social*, 295.

⁹⁷ John Lear, "Mexico City: Popular Classes and Revolutionary Politics" in *Cities of Hope: People, Protests, and Progress in Urbanizing Latin America, 1870-1930*, ed. Ronn Pineo and James A. Baer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 55-57.

⁹⁸ Beatty, *Institutions and Investment*, 6, 49.

⁹⁹ Cosmopolitan, urbane, and refined, he travelled frequently to New York, Paris, and Geneva. He returned to Mexico from these centers of the modern world with fresh capital, new business techniques, and cutting-edge advertising innovations. He was one of the founding members of the Moctezuma Brewery (now part of the present-day Grupo Modelo), the *Compañía Nacional Mexicana de Dinamita y Explosivos*, the French-Swiss investment group *Société Financière pour l'Industrie au Mexique*, and the

thoroughly modernized and expanded San Ildefonso wool textile mill and electric power facility. His administrative duties and stock 40

regime, Pugibet successfully positioned himself as leading the charge of Mexican modernization at the helm of his flagship, the Buen Tono cigarette company.

As company founder and General Director, Pugibet committed few mistakes on his path to industrial monopolist. Raised in the in the Haute-Garonne department in the French Pyrennes, Pugibet immigrated to Cuba in 1868 at the age of 15 where he found work in the tobacco industry. With the growing disruptions caused by the Cuban War of Independence Pugibet fled to Mexico and in 1875 arrived in the capital. He hired four employees and established a small cigarette factory that would become the embryo of *La Cigarrera Manufacturera El Buen Tono* in 1889. In the mid-1880s Pugibet assured his business success by marrying Guadalupe de la Portilla y Garaycoechea, a daughter of the Mexican aristocracy with noble family origins in eighteenth-century Spain. In addition to providing him with two sons and a daughter, Portilla brought him investment capital, useful contacts in the tobacco-growing region of Veracruz and invaluable connections within the Porfirian government. One of the most useful was her uncle, Juan Bárcena y Zugalde, who occupied the State of Veracruz governorship. That control of the capital and the patents of Buen Tono were in the name of Guadalupe de la Portilla when Pugibet transformed Buen Tono into an holdings also included establishments such as the *Banco Nacional*. In 1907 the French government awarded him the Legion of Honour and he played an active role in the French community in Mexico as administrator and patron in social organizations such as the *Cercle Français*, the French Commercial School, and the July 14

Independence Day Committee. His well-known philanthropic largesse extended to the Mexican community at large through his construction or donation of fountains, buildings, and churches such as the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de El Buen Tono*. The best summaries of Pugibet are his obituary, *Le Trait d'Union*, March 6, 1915, 1; and the *Diccionario Porrúa: Historia, biografía y geografía de México*, 5th ed.

(Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1994), 2366-2377. For information on the high rate of interlocking directories among the Mexican industrial elite (not unlike the United States at the time), see Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment*, 67.

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incorporated joint stock company illuminates the influence she held and would continue to hold in her partnership with Pugibet. [100](#)

Aside from the political protection afforded by his marriage to Portilla, Pugibet curried and obtained the support of the Mexican political elite. He offered them lucrative stock-purchase options and packed the administrative council with powerful notables such as the son of Porfirio Díaz, the Secretary of War General Manuel González-Cosío, Deputy Finance Minister Roberto Nuñez, and Julio Limantour, the Finance Minister's younger brother and well-known real-estate developer. [101](#) Pugibet unconditionally supported the government via the publicity campaigns of his company. Naming brands such as "Dedicados al Presidente de la República y á su Ministerio" or awarding every member of the newly inaugurated Congress a silver medal with the Buen Tono factory on one side and the President astride his horse on the other were merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Pugibet and his administrators placed Buen Tono in the forefront of businesses cheerleading at the biennial *fiestas presidenciales* by introducing new brands dedicated to Díaz and constructing 100 For information on the Portilla y Garaycoechea family background I am indebted to Victor Manuel Macías González and his tireless intellectual and physical pursuit of the Porfirian privileged classes compiled in *Apuntes geneológicas de la elite porfiriana*, MS., c.1994-1999. *L'Echo du Mexique* discussed the transfer of title by Sra. Guadalupe Portilla de Pugibet to the incorporated company on Feb. 18, 1894, 2, and Feb. 20, 1894, 2, wishing Ernesto Pugibet the same good business relations with the

new society members as he enjoyed with his wife. The ceding of the Decoufflé Mexican patent rights to both Pugibet and Portilla receives a paragraph in Agustín Verdugo, Jorge Vera Estañol and Manuel Calero y Sierra, *El Buen Tono y la 'Bonsack Machine Company.'* *Sentencia de la Suprema Corte de justicia de la Nación y Otras Piezas Relativas al Juicio Seguido Entre 'El Buen Tono' y el Sr. W. H. Butler* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Ignacio Escalante, 1900), 8. On a final note of Pugibet's indebtedness to the Portilla family's political and economic resources, *L'Echo du Mexique*, Jan. 30, 1896, 2, comments on the Portilla family occupying two of the four top posts within the administrative council of Pugibet's San Ildefonso textile mill and hydroelectric power facility (see footnote 17) suggesting that family money assisted in this enterprise.

101 Juan Manuel Aurrecocchea and Armando Batra, *Puros Cuentos: la historia de la historieta en México*, vol. 1

(Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1988), 120; and Reginald Tower, "General Report on Mexico for the Year 1908," Mexico City, to Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Office, London, January 1, 1909, doc. 262, *BDFA-Mex*, 303-341 in George Phillip, ed., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print. Part 1: From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the First World War. Series D. Latin America, 1845-1914. Volume 4: Mexico, 1861-1910* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1998), 326, *BDFA-Mexico*.

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elaborate, enormous floats that involved up to 200 parading workers. [102](#) In the last years of the regime when aerial advertising came into vogue, the pilot of the company zeppelin would switch from publicizing cigarettes to supporting Díaz-controlled politicians. The dirigible would also occasionally escort the Presidential train beyond the city limits en route to points throughout the Republic. [103](#)

His particularly close business, political, and social ties with Finance Minister José Yves Limantour demonstrates the fusion of business and politics among the Porfirian elite.

Limantour, considered the mastermind of the Porfirian economic miracle, held the post of Secretary of the Treasury and Development (*Fomento*) from 1893 until 1911. His personal papers reveal a lively correspondence with Pugibet beginning in the late 1890s. [104](#) Both men held extensive stock holdings in the same firms. For example, Limantour purchased Buen Tono stocks for himself and for family members such as his daughter Maria Teresa Iturbe.

Pugibet ensured Limantour the option of buying shares in his other business interests such as the San Ildefonso wool textile mill and Limantour reciprocated by guaranteeing Pugibet 5000

shares of the San Rafael paper factory, the newsprint source for the Republic's largest dailies. [105](#) Limantour received regular updates on the San Ildefonso factory as well as samples of the newest products. [106](#) Pugibet also accommodated Limantour's need to dispense patronage within his own *camarilla*, or network of political and family allies. Upon request from Limantour he provided jobs as varied as travelling salesman, shop foreman, and [102](#) *L'Echo du Mexique*, April 15, 1893, 2; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 30, 1900, 2; February 6, 1906, 3; April 2, 1909, 3; *El Imparcial*, Dec. 11, 1904, 4.

[103](#) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 13, 1908, 3; *El Imparcial*, February 4, 1909, 2.

[104](#) Archivo José Yves Limantour, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México CONDUMEX, Chimalistac, Mexico City. Hereafter cited as JYL-CONDUMEX.

[105](#) For examples, see Pugibet to JYL, Paris, July 28, 1899, Pugibet to JYL, Lucerne, August 9, 1899, and JYL

to Pugibet, Mexico City, June 6, 1899, CDLIV 1883-1899, Roll 11, Carp. 42; JYL to Maria Teresa Iturbe, Mexico City, March 5, 1907, CDLIV 1907, Roll 45, Carp. 17, JYL-CONDUMEX.

106 Upon leaving for Europe Pugibet sent Limantour one of the first fine-grade travelling shawls made by the factory. Pugibet to JYL, Mexico City, March 18, 1907, CDLIV 1907, Roll 46, Carp. 21, JYL-CONDUMEX.

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lottery manager. In one case, Limantour asked Pugibet to hire one young man, Augusto Agacino, who “committed the stupid act of marrying and now asks you for a job, any job, and will do so on a trial basis at whatever wage you will pay him.” [107](#) Pugibet also provided Limantour’s wife with pure nicotine to destroy mites in her home. [108](#) The relationship between the two men grew comfortable enough for Pugibet to offer Limantour the use of his Paris home and also the run of his New York apartment-suite when Limantour returned from his transatlantic voyages. [109](#) When Pugibet decided to enter the Mexico City real-estate market in 1906 he consulted with the brother of Limantour, Julio, who advised him to purchase the downtown Hotel Guardiola and then handled the transaction. [110](#) Through these social and financial connections Pugibet had essentially assumed an important role in Limantour’s camarilla, intertwining the interests of both business and state with a goal of advancing the progress of the Mexican nation. This link gained even more importance after 1898 when the death of Matías Romero signalled a power shift in the administration towards the *Científico* camarilla with Limantour at its head.

With substantial security granted by the camarillas of his wife and of Limantour, the fortunes of both Pugibet and Buen Tono began their stellar ascent in 1889 and did not abate [107](#) JYL to Pugibet, Mexico City, November 22, 1907, CDLIV 1907, Roll 45, Carp. 16; see also Joaquin

Núñez de Prado to JYL, Mexico City, March 29, 1901, CDLIV 1901, Roll 9, Carp. 15; and José Vazquez to JYL, October 16, 1907, CDLIV 1907, Roll 48, Carp. 25, JYL-CONDUMEX.

108 Pugibet to JYL, March 14, 1906 and JYL to Pugibet, March 16, 1906, CDLIV 1906, Roll 40, Carp. 13, JYL-CONDUMEX. An interesting aside—given the recent and on-going lawsuits surrounding the tobacco industry’s supposed duping of the public as to the health risks of tobacco—is that nicotine was already considered a dangerous substance during the Porfiriato: “. . . for it is well known, nicotine is most injurious to smokers.” In fact, El Buen Tono processed it out of tobacco and marketed it for home use against mites and for agricultural use against parasites in sheep. On the toxicity of nicotine and how they extracted it, see *The Mexican Herald*, Jan. 28, 1906, 9. Mexican hacendados commonly used the toxin on their flocks and the son of Porfirio Díaz was no exception as described in *El Imparcial*, Mar. 1, 1906, 2. On how this health concern impacted advertising, see *El Imparcial*, Nov. 7, 1907, 7, for the launch by the Tabacalera Mexicana of its luxury brand *Monograma*. The company noted that the cigarette contained a cardboard mouthpiece and cotton filter

“which blocks the passage of nicotine.”

109 Pugibet to JYL, Mexico City, May 23, 1903, CDLIV 1903, Roll 21, Carp. 15, JYL-CONDUMEX.

110 JYL to Julio Limantour, Paris, July 5, 1906, CDLIV 1906, Roll 38, Carp. 4, JYL-CONDUMEX.

until long after the Mexican Revolution concluded. In 1889 Buen Tono won the prestigious first prize award at the Paris Universal Exposition, the first of many international honours.

The next year, Pugibet moved the company to its new factory facing the Plaza de San Juan just five blocks south of the Alameda. Over the next two decades the factory complex would engulf neighbouring properties as the company added housing for employees, expanded tobacco warehouses, and constructed new production departments. ¹¹¹ Pugibet, like his main competitor, Antonio Basagoiti of *La Tabacalera Mexicana*, recognized the value of new production technology and confidently believed that increased output would not only crush competitors but also find ready absorption in an increasingly accessible national market. His greatest coup was the 1891 acquisition of the patent rights for the French Decoufflé high-speed and glueless cigarette rolling machines for a period of twenty years. So attractive an innovation was the replacement of manually-applied glue with mechanized crimping that the company named their first glueless brand *Pedid los cigarros sin pegamento de Ernest Pugibet* and garnered praise in the press. ¹¹² The company aggressively protected the competitive advantage afforded by the Decoufflé machines and spent much of the next twenty years in litigation fending off competing technology and extending the length of its patent privilege. Pugibet took advantage of new incorporation (*Sociedad Anónima*) laws passed in 1888 and completed the infrastructure of what would become Latin America's largest cigarette company. In 1894 Buen Tono became a limited liability joint-stock ¹¹¹ *Le Mexique*, June 20, 1907, 156; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Sept. 23, 1904, 3; Feb. 11, 1906, 3; June 16, 1907, 2; June 22, 1907, 3; Pugibet to JYL, May 20, 1908, CDLIV 1908, Roll 54, Carp. 20, JYL-CONDUMEX.

¹¹² Translated as: "Ask for the glueless cigarettes of Ernest Pugibet." On the registration of the new brand, see *El Economista Mexicano*, April 16, 1892, 4. *L'Echo du Mexique*, May 6, 1892, 4, offers one instance where the press extolled the hygienic and gustatory virtue of the new process and noted that the French tobacco monopoly used the same equipment.

company with an initial capital of \$1,000,000 pesos and 60 Decoufflé machines. [113](#) Over the next two decades the factory, production, and revenue would grow from annual sales of just over \$1,000,000 in 1894 to a peak of nearly \$7,000,000 in 1907 based on a capital of \$10,000,000 and a machinery base of over 200 machines. [114](#)

Pugibet not only industrialized the industry; he actively sought and finally achieved its concentration. He transformed the industry from a hodge-podge of hundreds of labour-intensive and parochial firms to one in which three firms of national scope invested heavily in new manufacturing, marketing and distribution technologies as well as adopted new business organization techniques such as the corporation. Due to the vigorous production, marketing and expansion of this triad of giants the number of tobacco factories in Mexico shrank from 766 in 1899 to 351 by the Revolution, and in Mexico City the number had dwindled to 15 by 1905. In contrast, while the number of producers plummeted the consumption of cigarettes rose from 4.9 million kilograms per year to 8.4 million kilograms, or from 328 million packets to 493 million. By the turn of the century, Mexican manufacturers achieved such a high productivity level and inexpensive commodity to virtually halt the importation of foreign, particularly Cuban and Virginian, tobacco products by the turn of the century. The success of Buen Tono during the 1890s compelled the formation of the second and third largest companies—*La Tabacalera Mexicana* and *La Compañia Cigarrera Mexicana*—which represented two conglomerations of smaller firms merging in 1899 as a means to confront the Buen Tono juggernaut. [115](#)

113 *L'Echo du Mexique*, Oct. 4, 1894, 1. That number increased to 104 in 1898, 190 by 1904, and over 200 by 1906. *Le Mexique*, May 20, 1898, 1; May 3, 1904; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 6, 1906, 3; Raoul Bigot, *Le Mexique Moderne* (Paris: Pierre Roger & Cie., 1910), 119.

114 Capital and investment information regularly appeared in the newspapers. Examples supporting these statistics include *Le Mexique*, May

20, 1898, 1; April 5, 1909, 113-115; March 20, 1910, 91-93.

115 d'Olwer et al., *La vida económica*, 693; Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment*, 48.

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While this chapter emphasizes Pugibet and Buen Tono, these two companies deserve due credit in spurring the tobacco publicity war to the heights that it achieved. Faced with the market domination of Buen Tono, these companies advertised heavily not only in the press, but also sponsored lotteries, popular entertainment, and other public spectacles with a generosity that often appeared to defy fiscal responsibility. Fortunately, the leadership of the firms possessed deep pockets. Spanish-born Antonio Basagoiti was Pugibet's counterpart at the Tabacalera Mexicana and he divided his energies between his tobacco, sugar, banking, textile and steel interests. [116](#) He combined his handful of tobacco companies with the interests of the Veracruz tobacco brokers Zaldo y Compañía with an eye towards capturing a larger share of the increasingly national market. [117](#) The Cigarrera Mexicana, a consolidation of four factories, included the Negrito factory of Antero Muñúzuri, El Modelo of Ampudia y Sucesores, Iñigo Noriega's La Mexicana, and Pesquera Sucesores. Unlike the Tabacalera which remained privately owned, the Cigarrera incorporated as a publicly traded company and significant quantities of its shares entered the portfolios of high-ranking Porfirians such as Enrique Creel and Ignacio de la Torre y Mier. [118](#) Both companies moved into new, expanded facilities located in Mexico City. As to be expected of any large-scale enterprise at the time, both possessed government connections and received official blessings for their new enterprises. Porfirio Díaz offered the toast at the inauguration of the Cigarrera Mexicana before touring the plant. He praised the successful "manufacture of cigarettes and cigars on a large scale . . . using all the mechanical advances and perfections that this [116](#) Luis C.

Cerda González, *Historia Financiera del Banco Nacional de México: Porfiriato, 1884-1910*, vol. 2

(Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 1994), 249; d’Olwer et al., *La vida económica*, 235; Alexander Saragoza, *The Monterrey Elite and the Mexican State, 1880-1940* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988), 57-59. Information on his funeral in Morelia, including the accompanying eight urban rail cars and numerous private carriages, may be found in *El Imparcial*, Jan. 6, 1905, 2.

117 Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment*, 70-71.

118 *El Imparcial*, July 22, 1900, 2; Oct. 17, 1900, 1; Nov. 12, 1900, 3; Sept. 9, 1909, 2.

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industry had achieved.” [119](#) These “mechanical advances and perfections” primarily referred to increasingly efficient rolling machinery, which these two companies largely imported from American companies such as Bonsack and Winston. In contrast, Buen Tono stood by its French Decoufflé technology. Together these three firms produced 5.2 billion cigarettes per year by 1910 with Buen Tono churning out 3.5 billion alone, and they controlled anywhere from 62 percent to 90 percent of the national cigarette market. [120](#)

Breaking down these statistics to consider personal consumption reveals that machine-rolled cigarettes were likely a commonly—if not daily—consumed commodity for a large percentage of Mexicans across the economic spectrum. Depending on the calculations used, consumption of cigarettes manufactured by these three manufacturers alone ranged from one pack a week to one every two days. [121](#) These numbers are consistent

with family budgets for semi-skilled and unskilled urban workers of the era. These accounts document that the family of a semi-skilled worker purchased approximately 30 packs a month while that of an unskilled worker purchased between six and ten each month. [122](#)

The advertising campaigns of Buen Tono led the industry in the drive to capture and expand this market. Freed of the onerous internal tariff barriers (the *alcabalas*, abolished in 119 *El Imparcial*, Nov. 12, 1900, 3; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 13, 1900, 3.

120 Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment*, 50-51; Tower, "General Report on Mexico for the year 1908," doc.

264.

121 Stephen Haber calculates (conservatively, I think) that the market for consumer goods in 1895 totaled 5,000,000 individuals based on the assumption that 2,000,000 workers engaged in non-agricultural wage-earning sectors supporting approximately 1.5 other people (Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment*, 27).

Integrating these numbers with the above production figures from 1907 reveals that every man, woman, and child integrated into the cash economy smoked 1040 cigarettes each year. The Porfirian cigarette packet contained between 12 and 14 cigarettes (*Le Courrier du Mexique*, Aug. 1, 1908, 2; Raoul Bigot, *Le Mexique Moderne*, 117) rendering each consumer a pack-a-week smoker. If we calculate the consumption of wage-earners alone on the shaky assumption that these are males and that, according to Porfirian proclamations, women and children did not smoke, each adult male consumer smoked 2600 cigarettes a year or more than a pack every two days.

122 For the monthly expenses of semi-skilled workers in 1913, see Box 55, Expediente 8, Fondo Ramo Trabajo, AGN. I am indebted to John Lear for this reference. As for the budgets of unskilled workers, see González Navarro, *La vida social*, 391.

1896) the company marshalled a network of travelling salesmen, rural agencies and peddlers provisioned by a rapidly expanding rail system to bring their products and advertising messages to a truly national and rural market. Nevertheless, Buen Tono retained its greatest presence in urban areas. From Chihuahua and Monterrey to Guadalajara and Mérida the exploits and advertising of El Buen Tono became a regular topic of conversation among the citizenry. As the greatest city and market in the Republic, Mexico City remained the bull's-eye of the company's target market.

The Buen Tono company staged a constant parade of spectacles and innovations for its clientele and the public at large. Seeking to transform a rather pedestrian consumer good into an icon of modernity the company adopted both a visual and text-based advertising program that linked its vision of material and cultural progress with that of both Mexican society and the nation. Smoking its cigarettes became for many Mexicans a conspicuous and affordable opportunity to demonstrate their sense of modernity, of keeping pace with the rapid changes occurring in their society, of being on the cutting edge of history in the making.

Spectacles of Progress

Promoting new technologies through novel public entertainments formed the core strategy of the big cigarette companies to associate their product with the wave of modernization thought to be washing over the Republic. In an effort to win over consumers, create new ones, and inculcate the relatively recent idea of brand recognition, the cigarette companies joined a multitude of lesser marketing campaigns in creating a commodified carnivalesque street culture embraced by residents of all social classes in Mexico City. The 49

newspaper *El Imparcial* summed up this vision of boulevard-centred spectacular progress promoted by Buen Tono:

The Buen Tono has believed that it is necessary to stimulate consumption by means most effective and, above all, most pleasing to the public and to do so without sparing expense or effort. To do so it has now installed a free cinema that provides innocent and enjoyable distraction to both middle and lower classes; tomorrow it launches its dirigible balloon and sends to the Flower Festival nothing less than its luxurious automobile that now serves to deliver its magnificent brands to stores across the Metropolis. All this, without counting its free lottery which periodically showers its consumers with thousands of pesos, nor the most irrefutable proofs of its generosity that grow day by day and are invariably translated into thousands of rounds of applause. [123](#)

Effusive in its praise and probably paid copy, this snippet from the Porfirian press reveals not only the entertaining innovations sponsored by Buen Tono

but also the language used to convey a sense of power to—and participation by—the consumer. This appeal to consumers and desire to please the urban crowd to which they belonged characterized the strategy of marketing tobacco in Porfirian Mexico.

Consider first the Buen Tono dirigible first launched in late 1906 and early 1907. No organization, not even the military, had ever flown a self-propelled and controllable airship anywhere in the Republic. Hot-air balloon ascensions first occurred in 1785 and continued through the Porfiriato (Buen Tono had maintained its own since 1900) yet for the first time spectators could view a pilot no longer left to the mercy of prevailing winds. ¹²⁴ Emblazoned on all sides with the company's name, measuring 30 metres in length, powered by a ten-horsepower engine and steered by pedal rudders, the dirigible promised mankind's conquest of the air for the first time in Mexico.

123 *El Imparcial*, May 2, 1908, 8.

124 For more information on early hot-air balloon ascensions, see Gary Kuhn, "Fiestas and Fiascoes—Balloon Flights in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," *Journal of Sports History* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 111-118. For an earlier flight for tobacco publicity purposes see Tony Morgan, "Proletarians, Politicos, and Patriarchs: The Use and Abuse of Cultural Customs in the Early Industrialization of Mexico City, 1880-1910," in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, eds. William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 154.

After a month of heavy promotion in the press and company advertisements the dirigible made its maiden voyage, its flight path providing telling insight into its commercial and cultural purpose. Piloted by Charles Hamilton, the dirigible aimed straight for the heart of the city rather than taking place in a safer location such as the Valbuena Flats with none of the obstacles and dangers of an urban skyline. Entering the Zócalo as he skimmed only metres above the National Palace where President Díaz watched the flight from his balcony, Hamilton proceeded to climb above the towers of the National Cathedral. Turning to the west then south he overflowed the Portal de Mercaderes commercial zone and the Municipal Palace before completing another circuit around the plaza. Now, after “handling the machine like a fine horseman handles his steed,” the pilot returned to the airfield by first buzzing the fashionable shopping thoroughfares of Plateros and San Francisco prior to crossing Alameda Park then, at the statue of Carlos V, heading southwest down the Paseo de la Reforma to Chapultepec Castle. Thousands of bystanders applauded and whistled from the crowded streets, sidewalks, balconies, and plazas beneath the flight path. Finally, after symbolically marking the most powerful political, religious and commercial sites of the capital and of the nation he veered north to end his journey at the Tivoli de Eliseo. [125](#)

Commentators commended the company for educating the population in the ways of the modern world. Various journalists waxed on about how Buen Tono had “popularized flight in Mexico” and pointed out “the incessant fight between old and modern means of transport” as its dirigible “characterised the conquest of the air, the pride of the twentieth century.” Not forgetting the commercial aspect of the flight, another added that “The Buen Tono, thanks to this audacious advertisement—which represents a considerable financial 125 The following articles provided the information for the inaugural flight: *El Popular*, Jan. 7, 1907, 1; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 12, 1906, 3; Dec. 15, 1906, 3; Dec. 18, 1906, 3; Jan. 8, 1907, 3; *El Imparcial*, Dec.

9, 1906, 3; Dec. 16, 1906, 3. For a list of aircraft specifications, see *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 22, 1907, 3.

sacrifice . . .—has achieved the popularization of science. Although others will undoubtedly imitate its achievement, only Buen Tono will accrue the glory of having introduced to the Mexican public one of the noblest inventions of the century.” [126](#)

Over the next three years this dirigible and its successors became a regular sight over the capital and beyond. In addition to repeating its first itinerary it circled over special events as diverse as those at the Peralvilla race track frequented by Mexico’s bon ton, the French Business School while visited by high-level government ministers, and, of course, the bullfights attended by a cross-section of *capitalino* society. [127](#) Díaz, attending the races at Peralvilla, “commented on the visit very favourably” and remarked that “the attractions of the balloon have eclipsed those of the race course.” [128](#) Keeping pace with its countrywide expansion the company sent the aircraft for a tour of the Republic, entertaining residents of Guadalajara, Puebla, and other cities. There, again, the airship “flew over the highest buildings and the towers of the Cathedral.” One observer noted that “the popular classes loudly expressed their admiration for the nimble flying of the dirigible.” In Guadalajara the bullring *El Progreso* received a flyover for at least ten minutes as the crowd “warmly applauded” the diversion. [129](#)

The dirigible remained popular even through the Centennial celebrations of 1910, but by then the search for spectacular novelty had produced a Bleriot monoplane. Pugibet was not the first to achieve the flight of a heavier-than-air craft in Mexico—Thomas Braniff earned the honour a year earlier with his take-off from the dusty Valbuena Flats—but he allowed the public to attend his flights which attracted large crowds. Imported from France [126](#) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 22, 1909, 3; Dec. 29, 1908, 3; Dec. 2, 1907, 3; *El Imparcial*, Jan. 30, 1908, 1.

127 *El Imparcial*, Jan. 30, 1908, 1; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 30, 1907, 3; Dec. 2, 1907, 3; Dec. 8, 1907, 2; Dec. 15, 1908, 2; Jan. 31, 1908, 3.

128 *El Imparcial*, Jan. 30, 1908, 1; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 31, 1908, 3.

129 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 22, 1909, 3; Jan. 25, 1909, 3; Jan. 29, 1909, 3.

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and piloted by Maurice Raoul-Duval, the plane made a number of short flights beginning on February 22, 1910. It garnered much praise but never achieved the same impact on the public as the zeppelin. Nevertheless, pilot Raoul-Duval took the opportunity to engage in healthy self-promotion: as the general agent in Mexico for Perrier mineral water and Pommery & Greno Champagne he used his publicity to boost his advertising campaign in the newspapers. [130](#)

Pugibet's emphasis on the public displays of the newest technological wonders underscores the clarity of his understanding of how consumption, spectacle, and modernity reinforced each other. As one newspaper remarked, "the Buen Tono has always been distinguished by the originality by which it attracts the attention of consumers to its unsurpassable products." [131](#) Whether those "unsurpassable products" were their cigarettes or spectacles did not really matter: consumers voraciously devoured both. Each epitomized the modern condition: as mass-marketed commodities their entertaining qualities of novelty, ephemerality, and cutting-edge technology required constant refreshment to retain their allure to the public. On a visceral level the cigarette advertisers understood this and provided a steady stream of spectacular promotions calculated for their

broad appeal that acted as selective infomercials on the latest wonders devised by science.

Take, for example, Electric Man. Electric Man walked through the main shopping area of Mexico City, elegantly dressed, “awakening the curiosity of all.” Wearing a frock coat and pants of “an irreproachable cut,” a hat of silk, expensive rings on his fingers and a gold-tipped walking stick, he garnered the praise of one newspaper writer as “the epitome of 130 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Sept. 4, 1910; Feb. 8, 1910, 3; Feb. 23, 1910, 2; Apr. 21, 1910, 3. For Raoul-Duval’s advertisements of his champagne and Perrier stocks, see *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 26, 1910, 5; April 23, 1910, 3; and April 24, 1910, 3. Note how the dates of his ads coincide with his flight dates. For pictures and the story of Braniff’s flight, see *La Semana Ilustrada*, Dec. 31, 1909.

131 *El Imparcial*, Apr. 19, 1908, 7.

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elegance . . . a ‘dandy’ in every sense of the word.” [132](#) What distinguished him from other similarly dressed men of progress was his electrical wiring. Wandering the streets at night he could light three lines of incandescent light bulbs woven into the back of his coat that illuminated the words “Eureka, Cigarettes ‘Calvé,’ El Buen Tono, S.A.” [133](#) Power flowed from six dry-cell batteries strapped around his waist that activated with the press of a button hidden in his pocket. Nightly he “blended with the most elegant gentlemen who strolled along Plateros, San Francisco [and other central streets]. . . until he paused to linger in front of a group of people standing before the doors of a club, business, or a family engaged in window shopping. Unexpectedly the bulbs would light up with a miraculous effect . . . today Electric Man is the topic of all conversations on the boulevard.” Electric Man represented the ideal modern consumer with his attention to

appearance, ease with new technology, and familiarity with the urban environment; in short, Electric Man epitomized the cosmopolitan citizen. A walking billboard, he offered a didactic model of emulation for the population of the capital as much as an advertisement for cigarettes. [134](#)

132 Every detail of the attire of Electric Man conformed with social prescriptions of good taste. Social etiquette books that flew off the Porfirian presses to advise the *nouveau riche* of the era on how to dress and behave noted the correctness of such finer points as gold-tipped walking sticks for evening perambulations. Morning and afternoon constitutionals required no more than unadorned wood to remain “truly *chic*.” A representative sample of this genre is Hilarión Barajas, *Pequeño manual de usos y costumbres de México, y breve colección de algunas frases y modismos figurados, de varios refranes y de muchas otras frases latinas, impuestas unas por el buen gusto é introducidas las otras por el uso y modo común de hablar* (Mexico City: Tip. Guadalupana, de Reyes Velasco, 1901), especially 25-30 for fashion advice. On walking sticks, 26.

133 The message referred to a new brand of cigarettes named after the French soprano Madame Emma Calvé who, with great public fanfare, recently graced Mexico City and the El Buen Tono factory with her presence and internationally-renowned rendition of *Carmen*. *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 25, 1907, 3.

134 *El Imparcial*, Apr. 26, 1908, 3. Further specifications of Electric Man come from the patent filed for the invention. Although invented by Y.D. Arroyo, El Buen Tono held the patent. His official name was “El Hombre Luminoso.” Legajo 209, exp. 17, pat. 7894, Apr. 9, 1908, Grupo Documental 218, Patentes y Marcas (Gris), AGN. Months earlier a similar invention received a provisional patent. A British inventor, Donald George Kennedy Turnbull, who was represented (as many budding innovators were) by the *Agencia Internacional de Patentes Julio Grandjean*, filed for the protection of a much bulkier form of the Buen Tono device. This contraption involved a box strapped to the chest with lights illuminating the advertising message within. Legajo 209, exp. 11, pat. 7318, Sept. 25, 1907,

and Legajo 207, exp. 24, pat. 8423, Sept. 30, 1908, Grupo Documental 218, Patentes y Marcas (Gris), AGN.

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For many years Pugibet kept a stable of horse-drawn carriages to transport and advertise his brands throughout the city. [135](#) So, too, did his competitors who also dressed-up and trotted out their vehicles on special occasions such as the *fiestas presidenciales* in 1900. [136](#) These 10-foot long advertising coaches pulled by two or four horses were often far more than just moveable billboards: they attracted crowds with multicolour light bulbs, electric bells and phonographs timed to synchronize with the displayed ads. The advertisements on the sides and rear of the coach were either rotated on canvas cloth (a *banda sin fin*) or projected from inside by a slide machine onto translucent sidewalls. One even provided a cinema show advertising multiple businesses with the screen mounted on the rear and powered by an electric motor. [137](#) These elaborate schemes were not without their flaws. The cinema coach required a large tank of water in case the heat from the lens set fire to the highly flammable acetate film, a not infrequent occurrence. [138](#)

By late 1907, Pugibet again separated himself from the competition when he imported from Paris the first of a fleet of internal-combustion engine delivery trucks to supplement then replace their horse-drawn carriages. [139](#) Shortly thereafter he added a far more elegant French-made Daracq sedan to his publicity fleet. Night and day the company [135](#) By 1897 the company employed five carriages for urban deliveries and two more travelling exclusively to the rail stations with the aim of supplying agencies across the Republic. Lucien Leroy, *Mexico: Ses Colonies française, suisse et belge et l'Etat économique, politique et financier du Mexique en 1898* (Mexico City: Imprimerie Bouligny & Schmidt Sucs., 1898), 50.

136 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 30, 1900, 2. In this case, *La Cigarrera Mexicana* paraded all their

“advertising carriages” (*voitures-reclâmes*) with all its employees while Buen Tono sent out two carriages covered in bougainvillias preceded and followed by 350 of its workers.

137 Advertising patents help to flesh out photos and news stories. Three representative samples of advertising coaches that received patent protection are: Legajo 207, exp. 5, pat. 5284, Jan. 25, 1906 (Carro anunciador

“Alerta”); Legajo 207, exp. 14, pat. 6918, May 31, 1907 (Un carro anunciador); Legajo 207, exp. 15, pat. 7080, July 19, 1907 (Un carro anunciador denominado “A. Jauregui”), Patentes y Marcas (Gris), Grupo Documental 218, AGN.

138 For information on fires in cinemas, consult Aurelio de los Reyes, *Los orígenes del cine en México (1896-1900)* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983), 78-80. The worst of these Porfirian conflagrations took place in Acapulco where 300 spectators died in a theatre fire in February, 1909.

139 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 28, 1907, 2. For photos of the mixed fleet, see Auguste Génin, *Notes sur le Mexique* (Mexico City: Imprenta Lacaud, 1908-1910), 7.

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ran the car strung with coloured lights through the city streets and in parades distributing thousands of packets of “its magnificent brands” to the crowds. [140](#) With an eye to not only entertaining but also educating the crowd this was a master stroke. Up to that point vehicles powered by the internal combustion engine had remained the playthings of the elite. José

Yves Limantour had imported the first vehicle in 1896 and by 1903 over 150 roamed the urban streets of Mexico, mostly in the capital where both fortunes and paved streets were most abundant. ¹⁴¹ They engendered both the curiosity and animosity of the masses toward the new technology much as had bicycles and electric trams. ¹⁴² Now Pugibet helped to popularize them by putting them to work advertising and distributing products as well as offering three as additional grand prizes in his nationwide lotteries in which tens of thousands of Mexicans throughout the Republic participated. ¹⁴³ Familiarity may breed contempt, but it also fosters acceptance. By removing the technology from a charged social context of haves versus have-nots and focusing on its marvel, utility, and accessibility (via the lottery) Pugibet provided more than spectacle; with his savvy, street-level marketing of the automobile he injected into the urban popular discourse a favourable view of national progress in its latest manifestation.

140 *El Imparcial*, April 19, 1908, 7; May 2, 1908, 8.

141 Génin, *Notes sur le Mexique*, 293; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 20, 1903, 2.

142 On the distrust of bicycles, see William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 13-66. For the widespread hatred of the electric trams through the work of popular artist José Guadalupe Posada, consult Patrick Frank, *Posada's Broadsheds: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 187-191.

143 *El Imparcial*, Dec. 7, 1906, 2. Photos of the three vehicles offered in 1907 exist in *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 30, 1907, 4; and *El Imparcial*, Jan. 26, 1907, 6. The lotteries, which ran from April 2, 1906 through the end of the regime, will be discussed later in this chapter. I have analysed the rolls of winners and the number of those who won \$10 or more average 1000 for each lottery. Again, this does not include the substantial number who won lesser prizes or nothing at all.

National lotteries sponsored by Buen Tono and Tabacalera captivated Mexicans from the first announcement in late 1905 until the arrival of the Revolution. [144](#) The concept of lotteries was not new; since the colonial period Mexicans had participated in the venerable National Lottery and either avoided or sought out the ticket-sellers who seemed to occupy every street-corner in the city. What was innovative for urban Mexicans was the stunning publicity and spectacle surrounding these once-mundane events. Soon others sought to capitalize on the lottery mania so that even the electric tram company held its own by using the numbers on its ticket stubs. [145](#) The Tabacalera kicked off the promotion by publicly thanking its consumers with a January 1, 1906 lottery. Shortly thereafter, Buen Tono claimed that since its monthly sales reached \$400,000 pesos it should return the favour to its customers. It then scrambled to offer four lottery draws for the year: April 2; June 2; September 15; and December 23. [146](#)

Both companies embarked upon a media blitz in the streets and crowded the daily papers with full-page advertisements, regular updates, and cartoons advertising the draws.

They offered impressive sums of cash for each draw, ranging from \$10,000 to over \$30,000

depending on the date. [147](#) The Tabacalera also included pictures of various animals on each ticket and offered instant free cigarette packets if the animal matched the one announced in [144](#). Consumers had already experienced tobacco company lotteries—both authentic and inauthentic—before 1905. In February 1894, just as El Buen Tono became an incorporated company, the newspaper *El Distrito Federal* announced that the cigarette company was offering a prize of \$5 for anyone who found a double seal (*sello*) in packs of the brand “La Mascota.” The following day Pugibet gave an interview tour of the factory to the local press declaring the contest was a hoax that would cause him financial ruin. He demonstrated with the cigarette-rolling machinery that a slight mechanical or human error

could result in double, triple, or even quadruple seals. *La Paz Público*, Feb. 18, 1894, 1.

145 *El Mensajero: Revista mensual de la Loteria de la Compañia de Tranvias Electricos, S.A.* , Nov. 1906, 1.

146 For the Tabacalera see the full-page ad in *El Imparcial*, Dec. 21, 1905, 6; Buen Tono's draw dates and lottery information is in *El Imparcial*, Feb. 4, 1906, 3. Regarding the dates chosen, note that the April and September draws coincided with Díaz's famous actions in Puebla against the French and also his Saint's Day.

147 This last, largest number comes from the April 2, 1909 draw as the company escalated its give-away beyond previous limits. As the article states, "for the next drawing the great company will invest \$30,000, with a grand prize of \$15,000. Get ready, reader." *El Imparcial*, Jan. 9, 1909, 2.

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the daily papers. [148](#) On a grander scale Buen Tono offered three French sedans in 1907

which it displayed across from its kiosk in the show windows of the Trutz carriage store. Not to be outdone, the Tabacalera offered a two-story house on Zarco Street. The company cleverly combined the concerns of the middle-class (and of those aspiring to the middle-class) over high real-estate prices and the economic contraction of 1907, reasoning that the middle class suffered most from financial recessions which endangered their chances to buy a home of their own. Thus they offered a new house "full of amenities and good taste" and recommended the lottery to "persons who desire a tranquil future as they put behind them the monthly nightmare of rental payments." [149](#) Proof of the public success of these lotteries lies in participation statistics. Buen Tono's first lottery involved 36,000 tickets dispensed and exactly one year later that number rose to 70,000. [150](#) The

Tabacalera did not release ticket information as readily but claimed that over 14,000 customers received prizes totaling \$24,000 in one of its earlier draws. [151](#)

The spectacle and suspense continued during the prize draws and delivery. Both companies staged their heavily publicized draws at their factories. To instill a sense of legitimacy in the event they combined the aura of scientific impartiality conveyed by newly patented lottery machinery with both official and popular scrutiny offered by the presence of 148 For example see *El Imparcial*, Jan. 1, 1906, 3.

149 Buen Tono cars noted in *El Imparcial*, Jan. 26, 1907, 6; exhibition in the Trutz windows, *Le Courrier du Mexique*, March 22, 1907, 3; the Tabacalera house, *El Imparcial*, Jan. 27, 1907, 8.

150 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, April 3, 1906, 3; April 2, 1907, 3. Note that the companies had different participation qualifications: El Buen Tono required 100 empty cigarette packets returned to the factory or kiosk in order to receive a single lottery ticket; the Tabacalera offered one ticket inside each packet. The Tabacalera argued for the democratic nature of its rules; Buen Tono did so for the higher chance of winning prizes with a more stringent policy. With this in mind, the latter figure of 70,000 tickets issued for the Buen Tono lottery indicates that 7,000,000 cigarette packets were returned to the factory and kiosk during a four month period.

151 *El Imparcial*, Jun. 23, 1906, 2.

government representatives and large public crowds. [152](#) At the Buen Tono factory crowds sporting a mix of sombreros and western-style hat wear walked in off the streets to view the event. Because the officials had the list of names and addresses of everyone who had received a ticket they could announce winners immediately after the draw. Sometimes the lucky were in

the crowd, other times they lived beyond the capital and the winnings were sent to them. ¹⁵³ Amazingly, these lotteries appear to have been legitimate with companies reporting lottery costs in annual reports, newspapers devoting considerable paid and unpaid copy to winners (including photographs and reproduced letters of thanks with signatures), and, in the case of Buen Tono at least, the donation to the charity of the *Benificencia Pública* of all prize money not claimed or undeliverable. ¹⁵⁴

Newspapers and cigarette companies played up the rags-to-riches angle of the top prize winners. With uncanny similarity to countless Greek dramas, Buen Tono performed quarterly acts of *deus ex-machina* as it randomly plucked members of the honest but downtrodden classes from a life of desperation and provided them with unexpected and previously unimaginable wealth. Their agent in these performances was Paul Pugibet, nephew of the factory owner. This Ed McMahon of the Porfirian Age would travel to the tenement homes of impoverished winners in the city to announce their good fortune and deliver the money. Publicizing these performances, the newspapers granted extensive ¹⁵² *El Imparcial*, Dec. 21, 1905, 6; *El Mundo Ilustrado*, April 8, 1906; and Gustavo Casasola, *Seis Siglos de Historia Gráfica de México, 1325-1925* (Mexico City: Editorial Gustavo Casasola, S.A., 1968), 1325.

¹⁵³ For out-of-town grand-prize winners for both companies, see *El Mundo Ilustrado*, April 8, 1906 (Miguel Ramos, San Blas, Tepic, \$5,000, Buen Tono); Jul. 15, 1906 (David Samuel Maceda, Puebla City, \$5,000, Buen Tono); and *El Imparcial*, Jul. 10, 1906, 2 (Antonio Vicente, Merida, \$1,000, Tabacalera Mexicana). Further information on the national aspect of these lotteries will be covered later in this chapter.

¹⁵⁴ On charity, see *El Imparcial*, June 8, 1906, 6; on letters verifying reception of prize money after the first three lotteries, see *El Imparcial*, May 16, 06, 6; Jul. 11, 1906, 5; and Sept. 29, 1906, 6. For the thoroughly suspicious see the correspondence between Pugibet and José Yves Limantour discussing company annual expenses (comparing the years 1906 and 1907) in which Pugibet states that they paid out \$24,000 in prize money for the December 31, 1906 lottery. Pugibet to JYL, Jan. 18, 1908, CDLIV 1908, Roll 54, Carp. 20, JYL-CONDUMEX.

coverage to children, women, and men of humble origins who often provided testimonials of their hard life and what they would do with these windfalls. Félix Gómez, winner of \$1000

in a 1906 Tabacalera lottery, was an archetype of the fortunate male. He wrote that he had worked in various printing presses for 30 years but with increasing expenditures and the hardships of life he had never been able to save a nest egg. He had lost hope, but thanks to his being an “assiduous consumer of the excellent ‘Flor de Canela’ cigarettes” he could now securely live the rest of his life “as a humble worker, in union with my family.” [155](#) In addition to men like Gómez, a surprising number of women and children won the lotteries.

In fact, approximately 12% of prizewinners were women and children. [156](#) This fact belied the Porfirian ideal that only men smoked. Newspaper and company accounts usually explained this away by portraying women and children as collectors of tickets and cigarette packets from older, male members of the family. Thus the stories attributed the success of young boys David Samuel Macedo in Puebla (\$5,000) and Alfonso Aceves of the capital (\$4,000) to the generosity of fathers and friends. [157](#) Accounts treated women as thrifty

“guardian angels” of the home, calling them “thoughtful and wise for taking care to ask their husbands for their lottery tickets.” [158](#) In one instance an 18 month old girl named Elena Montañez won \$6,000 when her mother mailed in her name the 100 packets smoked by her husband. This was to be Elena’s Christmas present because her father’s job as a mere 155 *El Imparcial*, June 24, 1906, 6.

¹⁵⁶ This statistic is based on my analysis of the posted winners of four Buen Tono lotteries occurring between April 1906 and December 1907. Of a total of 3175 participants earning \$10 or more, 87.7% were men, 11.7%

women, 0.4% boys, 0.2% girls. For the lists, see *El Imparcial*, April 6, 1906, 5-6; July 3, 1906, 5-6; Sept. 18, 1906, 7-8; Jan. 2, 1908, 3.

157 *El Imparcial*, July 19, 1906, 6; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Sept. 19, 1907, 2.

158 *El Imparcial*, June 29, 1906, 2. The term “guardian angel” comes from William E. French and refers to the construction of the Mexican middle-class female identity in terms of thrift, selflessness, and moral educators of the family conducted in the private sphere of the home. The “guardian angel” developed against the foil of the

“prostitute” or public woman supposedly given to maximizing ostentation and self-interest at the expense of morality and the fundamental unit of the Mexican nation: the family. William E. French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 87-108.

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magazine vendor “earned barely enough to nourish the family and his only pleasure was to smoke his daily packet of *Canela Pura*.” Another winner of \$2,000 was the wife of a poor policeman. Just like Elena’s mother she lived in a “small room in a tenement [*casa de vecindad*]” and carefully collected the empty packets of “Chorritos” left by her husband. She worried of the danger and frustration of her husband in his job “caused by the sumptuous residences he protects with nothing to show for it.” Then suddenly, one day, Paul Pugibet showed up and now the lucky couple planned to return to Oaxaca and start a business where they grew up and their family lived. Notably she—along with other major prize winners—

planned to spend their earnings in traditional, practical, and commendable ways befitting their socio-economic station. Self-improvement without

disturbing the social hierarchy seemed to characterize the working class lottery winner type.

Combined with the mass-circulation press, the lotteries were an integral component in the constructing a common set of consumer-oriented experiences for residents of Mexico City and, in fact, those of the entire Republic. Through company advertising of ticket sales Mexicans knew that thousands of fellow citizens joined them in this endeavour. Moreover the publication of lists of winners with their addresses meant that individuals could insert themselves into an urban narrative and experience a sense of belonging and order amid the chaos of the city as they read the names of friends, relatives, neighbours, drinking buddies, and perhaps even themselves. For many, the calendar of the late Porfiriato included not only anticipation for the change in seasons or the latest festival but also the advent of the next tobacco lottery and chance to *sacar el gordo* (hit the jackpot). In this developing urban and national narrative of notable events and daily rhythms the lotteries and the considerable publicity surrounding them positioned the cigarette companies as intermediaries between the 61

rich and poor, between modern and traditional. Through these spectacles they disseminated the message that the prosperity, technology and modernization of the Porfiriato benefitted all Mexicans. This effort to blunt social discontent by entertaining and educating the masses of Mexican society extended beyond lotteries to the captivating visions of the new cinematography. [159](#)

Capitalinos converged *en masse* to view the free, open air shows sponsored by Buen Tono after 1904. [160](#) Pugibet hired French filmmaker Enrique Moulinié to coordinate a two-pronged promotional campaign. [161](#) First, he bolstered his presence beyond the limits of the capital by sending Moulinié to the major state capitals to screen shows free of charge or in exchange for empty packets of El Buen Tono cigarettes. Within a year these shows included [159](#) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 27, 1906, 2; Jan. 4, 1907, 3.

[160](#) The cinema premiered in Paris in 1895. The Lumière brothers considered Mexico such an important potential market that it was among

the first tier of nations receiving Lumière salesman who gave their first exhibit in August of 1896. Unlike in the United States and France the rise of the cinema as a form of mass entertainment in Mexico did not proceed smoothly. At first garnering widespread acclaim, by 1899 its popularity nose-dived among respectable society—and therefore those who granted performance licenses—after growing criticism for the moral quality of both its films and its makeshift view tents for lower-class audiences.

Most entrepreneurs and filmmakers managed to survive only by taking their shows to state capitals and even small venues. On the importance of Mexico as a market for the Lumière company see Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896-1914*, updated and expanded edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 11. For opening night in 1896 see Felipe Garrido, *Luz y sombra: Los inicios del cine en la prensa de la ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997), 44-45. On the decline of the cinema in Mexico City and its early years in the provinces, see de los Reyes, *Los orígenes del cine*, 141-163.

161 Moulinié is a fascinating character in early Mexican cinema and commercial viewing venues. He left his children and France and emigrated to Mexico with his wife to make his fortune. Beginning in 1897 in the city of Puebla he presented shows of his own work and of that imported from the three major studios in France (The three major studios in France were those of George Méliès, Louis Lumière, and the Pathé brothers. The origins, outputs and impacts of these three are described at length in Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town*). Travelling throughout the Republic he exhibited shows in Guadalajara, San Luis Potosí, Chihuahua, and other urban centres with electricity. Somehow he even found electricity sources in small towns where spectators either sat on the ground or brought their own chairs. Eventually he settled in the capital and opened his *El Palacio Encantado* located across the street from the National Theatre. His establishment exhibited not only cinematic views but also a wax museum and an exhibition of optical illusions imported from the United States. For more on Moulinié, consult Juan Felipe Leal, Eduardo Barraza, and Carlos Flores, *El arcón de las vistas: Cartelera del cine en México, 1896-1910* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1994), 35-36. Moulinié's mixture of attractions suggests that he

adopted the idea for his business from the famous Parisian wax museum, the Musée Grévin, which by 1900 had incorporated the cinema to bolster ticket sales to its main attractions of wax displays. Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 89-148, 177-204.

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the first film advertisements in Mexico consisting of a still slide positioned between short films. [162](#)

The other half of Pugibet's plan involved the first truly free cinema in Mexico City open to the public. He erected permanent screens on the roofs of several buildings in the city. These included the public markets of Carmen and Loreto as well as in Santa Isabel and atop the façade of the company's famous retail kiosk located on the fashionable Puente de San Francisco. Visually exciting, the kiosk was situated six blocks north of the factory next to the Alameda and on the prepared site of the new National Theatre. [163](#) Set in the middle of the block rising three stories high and spanning eight metres in width, the kiosk sold cigarettes, provided a working display of the factory's famous high-speed machinery, and included a cinema screen on the third floor beneath the company's name carved ornately into the arched stone façade. On either side of the kiosk a two-story high wall wrapped around the block. The top half sported advertisements for the department store *El Palacio de Hierro* and the bottom half displayed three-metre high advertisements for each of Buen Tono's brands with posters on each corner publicizing the Moctezuma Brewery. [164](#) Within two years, in 1906, the company had replaced the original screen with an octagonal tower that held not only a newer screen but also a public clock and advertising space for all of its 162 Tony Morgan, "Proletarians, Politicos, and Patriarchs," 155.

¹⁶³ The location of this kiosk appears to have confused several historians, most notably William Schell and Anthony Morgan. Given the six block

distance between the factory and the kiosk one needs to assume either the excellent eyesight of Mexican spectators or an error on the part of these historians when they wrote comments such as “they filled the Alameda [Park] . . . to view . . . motion pictures projected onto a large screen atop the Buen Tono factory.” William Schell, *Integral Outsiders: The American Colony in Mexico City, 1876-1911* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 54. Morgan incorrectly states that Pugibet showed free films from his factory in 1904 and that the company’s “free films packed working-class audiences into the Alameda. .

.” Morgan, “Proletarians, Politicos, and Patriarchs,” 155.

164 The best photo of the kiosk that I have seen belongs to the Gertrude Fitzgerald Photography Collection, Box 1 Folder 1, Special Collections, University of Texas-El Paso.

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brands. [165](#) In its heyday the kiosk exhibited films nearly every night. The famed profligate use of expensive and relatively new electrical lighting by the company for not only the film exhibits but also for illumination before and after the shows added to the appeal of the spectacle. Hundreds of spectators crowded the streets, waiting for larger-than-life dancing images to burst the night and fill the darkened screens. Observers noted the diverse mix of classes in the audience. [166](#) Here they watched snippets of Mexico City and beyond come to life, frequently seeing local productions of places they had visited, events they had seen, people they knew, or sometimes even themselves. The chaos of urban life received a narrative as reality became spectacularized for urban spectators.

Pugibet fought hard to receive permission for the showing of these films. Like all entrepreneurs wishing to entertain the public, he had to gain the approval and licensing of the city council, or *Ayuntamiento*. [167](#) The kiosk was the first of the public screens and Pugibet personally wrote the

application in June of 1903. He asked not just for a license to run the free shows but also for permission to turn off a street light located in the median of the street directly in front of the screen. This last request required that the petition pass through the hands of the *Comisión de Alumbrado* whose chair, Nicolas Mariscal, would then give their recommendation to the Ayuntamiento. Pugibet persuasively argued that his aim would benefit the public by “providing this colourful distraction free of charge to passersby” and cause negligible disorder. He offered to pay for an automatic switch that would turn off the light only during the film presentation during the early hours of the evening which happened 165 *El Mundo Ilustrado*, May 20, 1906. Buen Tono bought clocks for this kiosk and its factory from the famous La Esmeralda jewelry store located just a few blocks away and owned by the Swiss Hauser & Zivy. See the company ad in *El Imparcial*, Jan. 26, 1908, 8, for the location of all its public clocks across the Republic.

166 For example, see *El Imparcial*, May 2, 1908, 8.

167 The municipal archives—the Archivos de ex-Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México (hereafter cited as the AACM)—contain a copious supply of these licensing requests and responses under the two categories of *Diversiones Públicas* and *Alumbrado*.

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to be the prime time for the residents of the capital to stroll along the fashionable boulevard.

He noted that other light from the “great number of electric bulbs” decorating the kiosk, the two streetlamps on either corner of the block, and from stores located across the street would be sufficient to “dispel the fear of a lack of light.” He concluded with an appeal or perhaps a taunt to the council to keep up with the modern world by adding that “it’s unnecessary to invoke examples of this in other great capitals [of the world].” Mariscal and the Lighting Commission recommended against the proposal for fear of

the dangerous cocktail combining diminished lighting with heavy pedestrian, coach, and electric tram traffic. Moreover, in the best tradition of bureaucratic nit-picking, he added that the disruption of service would break the contract with the electric company which required continuous service through those hours. Despite the opposition of the Lighting Commission, the Ayuntamiento approved the petition. [168](#) Surely Pugibet's political connections helped his application but more importantly Council seemed to have recognized the diversionary benefits of this public spectacle far outweighed the considerable fears of disorder caused by urban crowds. [169](#)

Social commentators like Luis G. Urbina marvelled at the extensive menu offered by the Buen Tono screens. In its "frames of living photography" the company "revealed comic and grotesque scenes, theatrical and dramatic episodes, romantic stores of love, adventures of miraculous journeys, and subtle and innocent children's stories." [170](#) The provenance of these 168 Ernesto Pugibet to Ayuntamiento, June 2, 1903, Exp. 1101, Alumbrado 1902-1905, AACM.

169 These fears of urban crowds were justified and grounded in experience. One of the most destructive displays of crowd violence in the capital during the Porfiriato occurred in November of 1884 when a crowd swept through the central streets destroying property including over 2000 streets lamps (hydrogen gas, not electric at this point) in the Zócalo, along Plateros, Cinco de Mayo and other thoroughfares. Council agreed to pay the company not out of contractual obligation but because street lighting was an essential public service.

Interestingly they changed the company's description of the event from public manifestations to

"manifestaciones populares" and "manifestaciones del pueblo" thus implicitly shifting blame solely onto the lower classes. Exp. 603, Alumbrado 1884-1888, AACM.

170 Cited in Manuel González Casanova, *Los Escritores Mexicanos y los inicios del cine* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1995), 41. For examples of a Buen Tono film listing in the newspaper, see *El Imparcial*, Sept. 24, 1905, 3.

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titles likely skewed towards domestic productions and French imports with a lesser contribution of American works. [171](#)

Buen Tono, as could be expected, did more than merely exhibit shows: it produced a number of them as well. In his first memorable cinematic coup Moulinié hired cameraman Salvador Toscano and popular actor Gavilanes (of Teatro Principal fame) and produced *Gavilanes aplastado por una aplanadora* (*Gavilanes rolled over by a steamroller*). This trick film, unusual among Mexican productions, appeared to come straight from the Paris

“special-effects” studios of George Méliès. Gavilanes begins the film walking along the central streets of the city when he is casually run over by a steamroller. Reduced to a two-dimensional figure he is saved by a passerby who kindly peels his face off the ground and sticks a Buen Tono cigarette (the recently launched and heavily advertised “Canela Pura”

brand) into his mouth. Miraculously he inhales and regains his three-dimensional shape before dancing happily to the laughter of the audience as the film ends. Toscano achieved the effect by stopping the filming and replacing Gavilanes with a cut-out replica. An assistant (presumably a small one) knelt behind the turned-up head and smoked the cigarette offered by the pedestrian. Buen Tono publicized the film in a variety of ways including its famous twelve-panel cartoon strips which condensed the narrative. [172](#)

Known Mexican film productions between 1896-1910 total 370 (Juan Felipe Leal, Eduardo Barraza, Alejandra Jablonska, *Vistas que no se ven, filmografía mexicana 1896-1910* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1993), 37-120) while the number of all productions shown is conservatively marked at 1100 (Leal, Barraza and Jablonska, *El arcón de las vistas*, 55-318).

171 Mexico did not escape the phenomenon of French domination of the global cinema market prior to World War I. Many of the films advertised in Porfirian Mexico match those mentioned in Abel, *The Cine Goes to Town*. Even the American market remained captive to the French; Pathé Frères alone dominated the silver screen through 1908. Low productivity, slipshod quality, and slow adoption of new film technologies by Edison, Biograph, Lubin and other American producers ensured French products a stranglehold on all levels of the market. See Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

172 Leal, *Vistas que no se ven*, 56. For cartoon strips following the same plot, see *El Emparcial*, Feb. 17, 1907, 3 (man run over by a car, smoke blown into mouth); Oct. 16, 1904, 3 (rural family run over by steamroller, again revived by cigarette smoke). This cross-marketing was not unusual for the company: for example, on one 66

The location of the Buen Tono screens also suggests the wide net cast by the company in its marketing. They located their famous kiosk in the heart of the city's retail and leisure zone, attracting (as noted above) a social mosaic of not only the *gente decente*, or respectable society, but also their social inferiors. For company prestige and marketing purposes this makes perfect sense. What remains far more surprising is their location choice for two of their other screens: the public markets of Carmen and Loreto. Both these locations existed in clearly lower class, peripheral areas of the city: Loreto five blocks east of the National Palace, Carmen about six blocks north and slightly east. Economic historians have considered the populations of these areas marginal consumers at best yet this information calls for a reassessment. For all these audiences entertainment blended with marketing and education messages. Buen Tono's shows were merely one

facet of the broader dissemination of images and texts to urban crowds linking consumerism, spectacle, and notions of modernity. The difference between Carmen, Loreto, and the kiosk is that the former two reached an audience in areas of the city often neglected by state officials and services.

The cigarette companies added to this abundance of free shows by sponsoring private performances for which patrons received admission in exchange for empty cigarette packets.

In the capital all the companies booked local theaters and entertainment venues for cinema, light opera (*zarzuelas*), comedies, dramas, circus, and variety shows. To commemorate side of a page in the newsmagazine *El Mundo Ilustrado* (Dec. 24, 1905, 8) readers read the story and saw action photos of the bullfighter Bombita and his exploits of the previous day; on the opposite side of the page ran a full-page advertisement by Buen Tono featuring text and a picture of Bombita in a tuxedo smiling as he holds a packet of “Canela Pura” brand cigarettes. Although no direct evidence links films to this advertisement, a strong likelihood remains that several of the numerous films made of Bombita and later Gaona included direct references to a sponsoring cigarette company. Citations for these films figure prominently throughout the lists of Leal, *Vistas que no se ven*, particularly 96-119. Buen Tono also immortalized Bombita in its cartoons, one of the funniest appearing in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Feb. 11, 1906, 3. For information on the author of these cartoons that appeared between 1903 and 1912, consult Thelma Camacho Morfín, *Imágenes de México: Las historietas de El Buen Tono de Juan B. Urrutia, 1909-1912* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2002); an analysis of their images resides within Steven B. Bunker, “‘Consumers of Good Taste’: Marketing Modernity in Northern Mexico, 1890-1910,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 227-269.

Independence Day in 1905, the Tabacalera Mexicana rented out the Circo Orrin for a variety show. The company packed the house with patrons who admired the lights and decorations specially purchased to adorn the exterior, the vestibule and the main hall. Nearly 2000

people watched films by Pathé on the Russo-Japanese war, applauded the sleight-of-hand skills of the “Brujo de los Salones,” and delighted in the singing debut of the lovely Jovita.

Throughout the film, female employees of the company (“*correctamente vestidas*”) handed out free packages of cigarettes to the crowd. This kind of publicity extended beyond Mexico City to the major cities of the Republic. After Buen Tono offered free shows in Veracruz the Tabacalera countered with its own offerings at Christmas that starred the popular dancing midget Emilio Romano (a.k.a. Lagardere) who led the crowd in “*vivas*” to the generous company and danced his 70 centimetre frame “until he could dance no more.” Unlike the free street cinema these shows (cinema or otherwise) duplicated the host establishment’s varied admission structure depending on seating location. In some venues over nine different categories divided the theatre. The primary categories were *palcos* (boxes), *lunetas* (stalls), *plateas* (the pit), and the lowly *galerías* (gallery) with the difference ranging between double and fifteen times the price depending on the venue. The Tabacalera probably holds the record for the most impressive mass rental of these theatres. To commemorate Independence Day in 1906 the company rented out the Principal, Renacimiento, Circo Orrin, Hidalgo, Lelo de Larrea, Guillermo Prieto, Popular, and Apolo theaters to perform a wide variety of shows.

Considering that the first four venues alone could hold between them at least 7000 people then quite a number of *capitalinos* celebrated the *dieciséis* as the guests of the Tabacalera Mexicana cigarette company. [173](#)

173 For the descriptions of Independence Day in 1905 and 1906 see *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Sept. 24, 1905; and *El Imparcial*, Sept. 11, 1906, 6. A

concise listing of several such events including Buen Tono's exhibits in 68

Print Media, Niche-Marketing and the Notion of the Consumer Citizen

Tobacco companies complemented and amplified the cultural impact of these public spectacles with a variety of print mediums and other marketing strategies that together formed a multi-tiered marketing campaign. They treated the Mexican consumer market as

“deep and wide”—meaning inclusive of all levels of society and nationwide in scope—

versus the standard conception of the market as shallow and narrow. In pursuit of encouraging the mass consumption of their products, cigarette companies did not confuse a mass market with a homogenous market.

Their advertising strategies grappled with the dilemma faced by all retailers of commodities of mass consumption: how to mass market a product to a sharply divided society. On one level, public entertainments in Porfirian Mexico City served to create and entertain a crowd, a mass of consumer-spectators sharing common commodified experiences that defined modern urban culture and distanced it from rural traditions. On another level, niche marketing catered to self- and group identification through branding strategies, print advertising, and even public spectacles as already demonstrated in the exclusively working-class locations of free cinema showings.

Cigarette company advertising suggested that a common language and set of shared experiences of modern consumption—particularly cigarette consumption—superseded divisive distinctions such as rich versus poor, modern versus traditional. This language and Veracruz are found in Morgan, “Proletarians, Politicos, and Patriarchs,” 155. The Tabacalera's parry in Veracruz comes to light in *El Imparcial*, Dec. 30, 1905, 3. Information on pricing structures for theatres may be found in a description of the Cigarrera Mexicana's cinema exhibit at the Riva Palacio Theatre in

mid-1907, Garrido, *Luz y Sombra*, 114-115; and also in the description of the Tabacalera's Independence Day festivities, *El Imparcial*, Sept. 11, 1906, 6. Seating capacity information comes from Emil Riedel, *Practical Guide of the City and Valley of Mexico with Excursions to Toluca, Tula, Pachuca, Puebla, Cuernavaca, etc.* (Mexico City: I.

Epstein, 1892), 217-218; and the "Informe de la Comisión de Diversiones Públicas", 1898, Exp. 909, Diversiones Públicas, 1891-1898, AACM.

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imagery of social harmonization clearly addressed social and political concerns of the day over the worsening socio-cultural divisions that accompanied the modernization project.

More striking is the positioning of the cigarette as the symbol and source of this unity.

Considered in this light, Mexican business may be viewed as promoting not only its own interests but acting as a cultural powerbroker in an era of simmering social disorder. By appealing to Mexicans as consumers and placing the cigarette as a shared object of desire by—and capable of defusing the tensions between—these "citizen-consumers" of a larger Mexican national community, the tobacco companies constructed their vision of Mexican modernity and the essential if not salvational role of consumer goods and consumerist values and identity in that vision.

Mass-circulation newspapers and lithographic presses were vital to the success of the cigarette marketing campaign. The dominant figure in the Porfirian Press after 1896 was Rafael Reyes Spindola. Reyes Spindola, the founder of the mass-circulation press in Mexico, combined government subsidies, unprecedented reliance on advertising revenues, and a strong

consumer- and sensationalist-orientation in his publications to undercut his competition and offer his dailies for a single centavo. [174](#) A new reliance on illustrations and then photographs permitted by new rotary presses purchased in 1903 offered authenticity to stories not to mention opening new possibilities for advertisings. By a large margin his publications outsold the competition. The flagship daily paper, *El Imparcial*, claimed a daily circulation of 70,000 in 1902 and 100,000 by 1910, while its sister publication *El Popular* touted 50,000 readers. The weekly newsmagazine *El Mundo Ilustrado* specialized in glossy photographs, high society events, fashion, and fabulous advertisements. Not surprisingly, the Buen Tono, Tabacalera and—to a lesser degree—the Cigarrera Mexicana tobacco companies ¹⁷⁴ For more on Rafael Reyes Spindola and the role of the Porfirian Press in advertising, see Chapter Two.

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frequently appeared on the pages of the Reyes Spindola publications in both paid and free copy.

Yet newspapers were not the only products of daily printing presses that shaped the visual universe of Porfirian urban life. Printed material other than newspapers needs to be considered to recognize fully the omnipresence and daily impact of tobacco and other marketing campaigns during the Porfiriato. This material includes the colourful and entertaining ephemera of daily street and public advertisements made possible and affordable by chromolithography that ornamented the urban landscape and were by far the most commonly viewed printed medium.

Buen Tono was one of the few companies with an in-house print shop and it relentlessly upgraded its presses so that by 1898 its lithographic department had become a selling point in the progressive self-image constructed by the company. Among the numerous tobacco factories described in the widely distributed *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*, Buen Tono alone warranted not only a description but also a photograph of its

lithography department. Domingo Gómez oversaw over a dozen employees working three machines to produce the coloured cigarette packages and fairly simple advertisements such as handbills. [175](#) Equipment changes and expansion characterized the department as propaganda needs and technology improvements intertwined. By 1907 the company had purchased new rotary lithographic presses from France that replaced printing stones with aluminum sheets and allowed for not only better colour range and quality but also expanded the possible size of the finished product. But the new presses were not the only imports from France; Alexandre Prudhomme and Auguste Ussel replaced the Mexican Domingo Gómez in running the department. They represented the ascendancy of the creative [175](#) Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva*, vol. 1, 179-180.

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over the technical as Prudhomme possessed both artistic and mechanical aptitude while Ussel received acclaim as a painter, drawer, and engraver. The company leadership clearly viewed the lithographic presses as more than mere printers of cigarette cartons and wished to capitalize on the capacity of artistic and coloured advertising to burnish its image and entice Mexican consumers of all classes. As Auguste Génin, wordsmith of the French community and Porfirian cheerleader, exclaimed in 1908 “Ussel. . . covered the walls of Mexico with advertising posters full of originality and possessed of a Parisian flavour and exotic *parfum* that matched the classiest of European masters in the field.” [176](#) A review of businesses for the Centennial celebration found the lithography department “amazingly well-equipped” with

“the most modern and expensive machines” while a French economic analyst remarked on the quality of the colour posters, the advertisements and the illustrations destined for the newspapers. [177](#) Between the mass-circulation press and its lithographic department, Buen Tono possessed the potential to reach a deep and wide market with its brands and image.

This potential became a reality when combined with the practice of niche marketing and an excellent distribution and transportation system at both local and national levels.

Pugibet and his major competitors recognized that capturing a mass market for their cigarettes did not preclude but rather demanded that they target their products differently to accommodate the distinct economic and cultural divisions in Mexican society. Graduated pricing was one of the most basic distinguishing factors. All three big companies did this.

176 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, June 21, 1907, 3; Génin, *Notes sur le Mexique*, 127-128.

177 Cited in *Crónica Gráfica de la Ciudad de México en el Centenario de la Independencia* (Mexico City: Departamento del Distrito Federal, Secretaria General de Desarrollo Social, Comité Interno de Ediciones Gubernamentales, 1988), 62. This is a reproduction of the 1910 *Álbum gráfico de la República Mexicana* compiled and authored by Eugenio Espino Barros. The French economic analyst was Raoul Bigot who sought to improve the state of French imports to Mexico and reverse their steady decline in the face of German, American, Belgian and British competition. He attacked the arrogance of French producers for resting on the supposed world-renown of their products instead of aggressively marketing on the terms of each host society and economy. For him, Buen Tono stood out as an ideal wedding of French quality and luxury with savvy advertising and distribution. Bigot, *Le Mexique Moderne*, 119.

Buen Tono pricing in 1906 ranged from a few centavos to over 15 centavos. It even made this distinction during its lotteries: a hopeful smoker turned in either 100 empty packets of brands costing less than 10 centavos each or 50 priced over that amount in return for one lottery ticket. [178](#) In return for this premium a consumer received better tobacco, often finer paper (usually rice paper), more elaborate and elegant packaging (including foil lining), and of course the social cachet of being seen smoking cigarettes such as “Parisienses,” “Rusos,”

“Cycle,” “Jockey Club,” “High Life,” “Elegantes,” or “Reina Victoria.” The names of these luxury brands reflect the modern, cosmopolitan, and cutting-edge self-image or aspirations of those who smoked them. Not surprisingly, branding reflecting the deep cultural divisions in Porfirian society as names alternated between evoking cultural traditions and striking a trendier, more modern note. Brands aimed at a more plebeian clientele include the wildly popular “Canela Pura” of Buen Tono and “Flor de Canela” from the Tabacalera Mexicana as well as “Canarios,” “Chorritos,” “Granaderos,” “Mexicanos,” “Sabrosos,” “Sirenas,” “La Popular,” and “Torpederos.” For those unable to decode the class significance of names and packaging the companies happily spelled out the distinctions. Buen Tono, for example, detailed how attendees of the Spanish *fiestas de Covadonga* purchased “the popular ‘Canela Pura’ and the aristocratic ‘Sublimes’.” [179](#) This sample is merely a small fraction of the enduring brand names offered by the Big Three not to mention those of their competitors. [180](#)

The companies regularly launched new brands and frequently named them to commemorate special events. The Buen Tono company, for example, created “Cigarros El Centenario” for 178 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 12, 1906, 3.

[179](#) *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Sept. 12, 1909, 10.

[180](#) Flipping through any newspaper in the country would likely yield advertisements for one or more cigarette brands. Occasionally certain advertisements or articles listed a number of brand names. For the brands of the Cigarrera Mexicana see *El Imparcial*, May 20, 1907, 6; for Buen Tono consult the wonderfully graphic advertisement in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, April 15, 1906, 4.

the 1910 celebrations, “Alfonso XIII” for the naming of the company as the official provider of the Spanish Royal House, and “Judic,” “Mazzantini,” and “Calvé” to pay tribute to the Mexican tours made by these French and Italian actresses and *chanteuses*. [181](#) The innumerable brands and the celebrities, events, trends, and cultural types they adopted defied the notion of “one-size-fits-all” mass marketing. Moreover, while the multitude of names reflects the constant pursuit of novelty to entertain and entice consumers, it also suggests the fluid cultural literacy of Mexican consumers and the never-ending task of advertisers to pair and promote a title and an image that had meaning for potential buyers.

Where the Buen Tono and its competitors advertised indicates their aggressive and targeted marketing strategy. They advertised everywhere: in newspapers to reach a literate audience; in the streets not only with text but also bright graphics and symbols to attract the illiterate. It seemed that no matter where *capitalinos* walked they could not avoid the sheer overwhelming quantity of colourful tobacco advertising and vendors. Ambling along streets they encountered colour posters on walls and on columns such as those in the Zócalo and the Buen Tono kiosk. At Christmas they could pick up beautifully lithographed calendars, pocket agendas, almanacs, and even pencil cases shaped like cigarette packets from the Buen Tono kiosk and factory. [182](#) Men passed out handbills advertising brands in the train stations and in the streets. [183](#) A hop aboard a street car offered one a new menu of cigarette and other [181](#) See, for example, *El Imparcial*, Mar. 17, 1907, 3, for the Royal Concession from Alfonso XIII to Pugibet; *Frivolidades*, May 22, 1910, 4, for the launch of “Cigarros El Centenario”; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 25, 1907, 3, for the tour of Buen Tono and Mexico by Mme. Calvé; and *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 10, 1890, 3, and *El Periódico Oficial* (Oaxaca), April 24, 1887, 1, for mention of the brands named after Mazzantini and Judic.

182 A smattering of examples of this Christmas largesse includes: *L'Echo du Mexique*, Jan. 4, 1896, 2; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 24, 1899, 3; Jan. 1, 1902, 3; Jan. 3, 1903, 2; Dec. 23, 1904, 3; and Dec. 27, 1904, 3.

183 Martin, *Mexico of the Twentieth Century*, 118.

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ads posted not unlike those in mass transit vehicles today. ¹⁸⁴ If exiting the tram downtown, a smoker might use his accumulated packets to receive a 25% discount at one of a number of famous stores including the Palacio de Hierro department store or the Esmeralda jewelry emporium. ¹⁸⁵ Urban residents may have encountered one of the many other new advertising forms for cigarettes including rotating billboards, leaflet dispensers, and even a Pavlovian-inspired cigarette sample dispenser. In this last item an electrically backlit mini-billboard housed a motor to rotate a cloth band of advertisements (the approved patent application uses El Buen Tono's "Chorritos" brand) while buttons on the side allowed passersby to press them for free samples of whatever product was featured at that moment. ¹⁸⁶ Waiting for a theatre performance to begin left spectators exposed to advertisements dangling before, printed on, or projected onto the stage curtain. ¹⁸⁷ If one desired a pre- or post-show drink and did not have the time to drop by a local cigarette *expendio* on the way to a *pulquería*, *figone*, or cantina he could pick up a pack from the cigarette vendor parked by the door. ¹⁸⁸ Inside drinking establishments as well as grocery stores (*tiendas de abarrotes*) shopkeepers plastered walls with thick, paperboard ads for bottled beer and cigarettes that typically ¹⁸⁴ Illuminating descriptions of tobacco advertising forms and locations may be found in *La Gaceta de Policia*, Feb. 11, 1906, 6; and Feb. 18, 1906, 6.

¹⁸⁵ *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Mar. 25, 1909, 2.

¹⁸⁶ Examples of these inventions with confirmed public use include Legajo 207, exp. 33, pat. 9131, May 10, 1909 (revolving 3-panel billboard); Legajo

207, exp. 18, pat. 8085, June 8, 1908 (automatic advertisement dispenser); Legajo 209, exp. 13, pat. 7013, June 26, 1907 (cigarette sample dispenser), Patentes y Marcas (Gris), Grupo Documental 218, AGN.

187 A photo of an advertising theatre curtain can be found in *México, ¿quieres tomarte una foto conmigo? Cien años de consumo* (Mexico City: PROFECO/Editorial Gustavo Casasola, 1996), 31. Visual and text descriptions of more advanced stage curtain advertising technologies reside in successful patent applications such as Legajo 207, exp. 20, pat. 8180, July 17, 1908 (“Telón anunciador sin fin”); and Legajo 207, exp. 22, pat. 8221, July 21, 1908 (“Un mecanismo aplicable a los telones anunciadores para espectáculos), Patentes y Marcas (Gris), Grupo Documental 218, AGN.

188 Anita Brenner noted this common sight in *The Wind That Swept Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), plate 10.

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measured 11x14 inches. [189](#) Even vendors at public markets and popular festivals set up covered stalls to sell machine-rolled cigarettes, their posters conspicuous amidst rows of unadorned tables that sold fruit, sweets, and other unbranded items to a lower-end clientele. [190](#)

The ubiquity of the tobacco industry in the press matched that found in the street. In considering the reach of newspapers one needs to keep in mind that circulation numbers did not accurately reflect the numbers reached by each edition; in discussing circulation, Rafael Reyes Spindola carefully claimed 70,000 “buyers,” adding “I don’t say readers, because it is known in Mexico that we must calculate at least four readers for each paper. [191](#) Buen Tono led the Tabacalera Mexicana and the Cigarrera Mexicana in ad placements in journals such as *El Mundo Ilustrado* and *El Tiempo Ilustrado* aimed at a respectable readership. Here, paid and unpaid articles mixed with ads that ranged in size from one-fourth to whole pages as they mixed image

and text, drawings and photographs. The ratio reversed slightly in the penny press which offered a potential market of wage-earning labourers. Buen Tono dominated in papers such as *Actualidades* and *Frivolidades* aimed at the affluent and hedonistic segment of the capital's population. Where companies spent their advertising dollars reflected the public image of the companies and their products. Buen Tono covered the broadest spectrum of the market while the Cigarrera concentrated on the middling to lower segments. The 189 Nearly any photo of a drinking establishment or grocery store reveals these posters. Two excellent photographs of the interiors of *tienda de abarrotes*—one unnamed and servicing a working class clientele, the other the famously posh *Ultramarinos Finos* provisioning the *bon ton* of the capital—exist in a postcard collection compiled by Victor Alfonso Maldonado, *México: A principios de siglo* (Mexico City: Agualarga Editores, S.A., 1996). Porfirian writer Ángel de Campo based his novel *La Rumba* on the working-class barrio circling the plaza of the same name. In his description of the *cantina de barrio* he noted the “cigarette ads glued to the wall.” In *Ocios y Apuntes y La Rumba* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1995), 210. The size and composition of the posters come from two in this author's personal collection of Mexican advertising. Both advertise El Buen Tono brands, one for “Mejores,” the other a list of premium brands next to tuxedo-clad smoker. The first is older, the second newer as reflected in its superior graphics and technical finish.

190 See the photos of the *verbena de los Angeles* in *La Semana Ilustrada*, Aug. 12, 1910, 12.

191 Rafael Reyes Spindola to JYL, Mexico City, Dec. 5, 1902, CDLIV 1902, Roll 14, Carp. 13, JYL-CONDUMEX.

Tabacalera coveted and challenged the range of Buen Tono but lacked the packaging technology and luxury cachet to make serious inroads into the premium market.

Their significant and extended presence in the Penny Press and the courting of its working-class clientele suggests that producers of certain industrial products and services believed a lucrative mass-market existed in Mexico as cigarette ads joined those for furniture, aluminum beds, watches, phonographs and photography. ¹⁹² These ads did not just appear in papers advocating a more moderate, mutualist approach to labour relations; in fact, the greatest number and frequency of ads occur in *El Diablito Bromista*, one of the most radical papers which advocated the strike. In its pages it covered and commended cigarette companies for providing spectacles for workers at venues such as the Orrin Circus or for hosting bullfights at which they handed out quantities of free packets exceeding 10,000. ¹⁹³

Equally important and illustrative of the sophisticated niche marketing practiced by the companies is the way in which they adapted specifically to the technical limitations of the Penny Press and catered to the tastes of its readership. Most of these papers ran on a shoestring and did not have sophisticated presses; as a result the tobacco companies reigned in their increasingly splashy visual ads used in better-equipped papers such as those of Reyes Spindola. Still, they occasionally mixed text and image such as Buen Tono's placement of their famous cartoon strips or the Tabacalera's inclusion of mixed text and pictogram riddles possibly designed by the likes of José Guadalupe Posada. ¹⁹⁴ The use of humour and word 192 Examples of these goods and services are as follows: for furniture see *La Palanca*, Nov. 6, 1904, 4; for watches see *La Cagarruta*, Dec. 20, 1906, 4; for aluminum beds see *El Diablito Bromista*, July 10, 1904, 4; for photographs see *El Chango*, May 28, 1905, 1; and for phonographs see *La Guacamaya*, Dec. 5, 1902, 3.

¹⁹³ *El Diablito Bromista*, Oct. 26, 1905, 5; Nov. 26, 1905, 1.

¹⁹⁴ Buen Tono cartoon appears in *El Heraldito Obrero, Defensor de los Obreros*, June 11, 1905, 4. The Tabacalera picture riddles appear in *El Diablito Bromista* on the dates of Oct 1, 1905, 1; Oct. 8, 1905, 1; and Nov. 12, 1905, 1. The possible Posada riddle appears on Sept. 25, 1905, 1, with his signature in the bottom right. In this riddle the top line consists of seven segments. The first is an upside down sun, second a small "e"

over a large “M”, third a small “o” in the crook of a large “J”, fourth a bull, fifth is three cigarettes, sixth an “el”

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play demonstrate the recognition by cigarette advertisers of the popular practice of *albures*, or language games, among the Mexican lower class. [195](#) Other advertisers in the popular press used this popular custom as did newspaper editors on Page One, but no one matched the cleverness or length (often two-thirds or a whole page of a four page paper) of the stories told by the Tabacalera. These involved popular themes set in quickly identifiable or working class places with easily recognizable characters. Take the story entitled *La Mansion de Luzbel* in which two agents of the company travel to hell to gain an audience with the devil.

Lucifer, his minions, and his captive clientele made up of cheating moneylenders, flirtatious women, drunks, thieves and scoundrels try the products after enduring a hard sell pitch of the merits possessed by the brands Sirenas, Supremos, and Flor de Canela. Instantly the mansion of hell “becomes a palace of light, or opulence, of music, and of aromatic flowers” as the residents dance “cuadrillas. . . cake-walks, and polkas” compelling Lucifer to permit the smoking of Tabacalera brands one hour per day. [196](#)

Cigarette advertisers reached out not only to all levels of Mexican society but also to the foreign communities. This strategy made sense as foreigners tended to have more money and disposable income. They also made up the top ranks of the cigarette companies. Pugibet (French) and his Assistant Director Andrès Elizaguirre (Basque) of Buen Tono and the Spanish leadership of the Tabacalera courted their own national or ethnic communities as inside a large “D”, and seventh an image of the earth. This translates into “Los [*sol* backwards] mejores [*res* is the steer] cigarros del mundo.”

195 María Elena Díaz, "The Satiric Penny Press for Workers in Mexico, 1900-1910: A Case Study in the Politicisation of Popular Culture," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22, no. 3 (October 1990), 518. Díaz argues that the *albures* demonstrate the utilization of folklore as a vehicle for transmitting ideas of social and political protest, but given that approximately half of the paper consisted of advertising—many of which employed *albures*—the same claim could be made for popular customs being used to transmit the values of the market and consumerism.

196 *La Mansión de Luzbel* appears in *La Guacamaya*, Feb. 8, 1906, 3. These stories by the Tabacalera appear regularly in this paper, including the dates of Nov. 30, 1905, 2-3; Dec. 28, 1905; Jan. 11, 1906, 2-3; Jan. 18, 1906, 3; Jan. 25, 1906, 3; Feb. 1, 1906, 3. Similar stories appear in *El Diablito Bromista* throughout the autumn of 1905, including Oct. 8, 1905, 3.

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well as many others. In all, the Italians, Spanish, Germans, Americans, French, Belgians, and Basques all enjoyed the sponsorship of these companies for their national celebrations, social clubs, and other institutions and events. While fairly minor players in terms of overall market share these communities held major sway in setting trends and tastes among the larger Mexican society, particularly those of the smart set and those wishing to be part of it.

One particular way of transmitting these tastes to a larger audience was, of course, the newspapers which covered the patronage of the Tabacalera at the Spanish national celebrations of Covadonga or that of Buen Tono at the galas held at the Casino Español. For the 70,000 individuals buying *El Imparcial* or the thousands buying other publications, the cumulative effect of these stories could be considerable, if unquantifiable, on those with social aspirations.

The presence of women remains the one category missing thus far in the discussion of a deep market. Mexican women had enjoyed smoking long before the Porfiriato and continued to do so after Porfirio Díaz took office. El Borrego, the winner for tobacco elaboration in the National Exposition in 1875, topped an advertised list of its products with

“small cigarettes for ladies.” [197](#) In Oaxaca the tobacco manufacturer La Poblana advertised its brand “Damitas” (“Little Ladies”) as “cigarettes well-known by the fair sex in Oaxaca”

and promised “In these little cigarettes we do not omit or sacrifice anything to please the delicate tastes of our kind consumers [gendered feminine as *nuestras consumidoras*].” [198](#)

Yet the Porfirian embrace of foreign investors and capital also encompassed cultural values proscribing tobacco consumption among women. With little delay the Victorian notion (if not reality) of separate spheres for men and women had imbued the public [197](#) *El Anunciador Mexicano: Organo de Comercio e Industria*, Nov. 22, 1877, 3.

[198](#) *La Victoria* (Oaxaca), Feb. 1, 1878, 4.

discourse of the respectable classes. Smoking became gendered masculine and induced changes in domestic architectures such as the creation of the *salon de fumar*, or smoking room. As the gentler sex, women were to find smoke disagreeable and merited certain considerations for their delicate nature. This resulted in a running battle over smoking in enclosed public spaces. Theatres became gendered battle zones as men complained about the plumage and elevated grandeur of women’s hats (women were, of course, slaves to fashion) and women objected to the stench emitted and

noxious clouds formed by men's cigars and cigarettes. More than mere grumbling, some chose to take their cases to the City Council, for as one male petitioner frothily ranted, women's hats were "extremely disagreeable, rather bothersome, and even anti-hygienic to the public" before adding almost as an afterthought that they also blocked his view. ¹⁹⁹ The Council did not act, probably recounting the futility of earlier bans in 1902 and 1893. ²⁰⁰ In a letter published in *El Imparcial* one woman suggested that women would stop wearing hats in theatres if men stopped smoking in the city tramcars. ²⁰¹ The trams joined the theatres as another contested smoking zone with newspapers taking sides and printing letters, all of which reinforced the notion of women as offended nonsmokers. ²⁰² Finally, in March of 1909, Governor Guillermo de Landa y Escandón decreed a ban on smoking in trams. This led to another escalation in the print gender wars. In desperation, nicotine-deprived smokers such as the German civil engineer F.

Mathis wrote open letters to Ernesto Pugibet pleading with him to do something, perhaps 199 Carlos Tejeda to Ayuntamiento, Nov. 20, 1900, Exp. 1054, *Diversiones Públicas 1899-1900*, AACM.

²⁰⁰ *L'Echo du Mexique*, Mar. 11, 1893, 2; and *El Imparcial*, Sept. 5, 1902, 4. The *El Imparcial* article reminded readers of the ban, pleaded the case of fire safety, then took a castigatory tone in noting that recently over 50

spectators and actors had been detained and fined from \$5 to \$20. The shrillness of the article suggests the mass public opposition to, and futility of, the anti-smoking decrees.

²⁰¹ *El Imparcial*, July 28, 1899, 1.

²⁰² *El Imparcial*, Oct. 29, 1905, 2.

provide smoking cars, since he was the dominant cigarette producer in the country. [203](#)

Meanwhile, the newspaper *Actualidades* best captured the friction between the sexes. Three days after the ban started, the paper printed a cartoon image of a tram in which a single primly dressed lady and the conductor ride inside while fifteen men cling to the outside as they smoke. In an accompanying article an indignant patron, writing under the pseudonym

“Cyrano,” recounts how after a conductor caught him smoking he angrily declared “I’ll smoke whenever I want.” In response the conductor threatened to call a nearby policeman and warned “Sir, . . . the fair sex requires certain considerations.” [204](#)

Yet whether or not Mexican women desired or simply “required” these considerations remains at issue. Considerable evidence suggests that Porfirian women did not break the habit nor did tobacco companies pay more than lip service to the idea of the abstaining female. While smoking may have declined among women of respectable society there remained an enduring love of tobacco among the majority of Mexican society which disregarded the strictures of foreign observers and domestic elites. In January of 1897

Modern Mexico noted that “nobody chews tobacco, but nearly everybody smokes cigarettes, including most of the women of the lower classes.” Several months later it repeated the same observation. [205](#) The following advertising poem placed in the popular press also suggests that tobacco companies did not shy away from featuring lower class women smoking:

“Listen

up”

Said

China

to

Villela,

A cowboy with considerable seductive power;

“When you throw me a flower,

Let it be ‘Flor de Canela’

203 Despite these pleas I have found no evidence that Pugibet officially sought a retraction of the decree. One of the letters to Pugibet may be found in *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Mar. 10, 1909, 3.

204 *Actualidades*, March 15, 1909, 13.

205 *Modern Mexico*, Jan. 1897, 10; June 1897, 13.

Of

the

Tabacalera

Mexicana.” [206](#)

Numerous foreign traveler accounts indicate smoking among women was not a habit limited to those among the lower strata of Mexican society. In 1888 William Curtis wrote

“Everybody smokes, women as well as men.” [207](#) Nine years later Percy Martin spent considerable time describing the smoking habits of Mexicans and concluded that “Practically every man and many women smoke.” [208](#) Shortly afterwards, W. E. Carson observed the habits of Mexican elite women and remarked that “Smoking is very general among them, and this is very often done in quite an open manner and in company with the male member of the family.” [209](#) This chasm between observed behaviour and prescribed gender roles regarding tobacco consumption appears to gape as wide as that between the ideology of separate spheres and the actual public presence of women on the streets of Mexican cities. [210](#)

During the late Porfiriato, tobacco companies continued the tradition of gender-specific products less by actual advertising declaration and more by encoding the product, packaging, and advertising with culturally accepted feminine characteristics. For example, they defined “feminine” cigarettes by their size, slimness, and delicacy of rolling paper.

Brand names and packaging also reflected gender distinctions. Advances in lithography allowed not only colour but also a more sophisticated range of colors and images to convey gender appropriate signals to consumers. A man would more likely purchase a brand called

“Torpederos” with a big torpedo on the front than he would a package of “Margaritas,”

206 *El Diablito Bromista*, Oct. 1, 1905, 3.

207 William Curtis, *The Capitals of Spanish America* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1888), 37.

208 Martin, *Mexico of the Twentieth Century*, 196.

209 Carson, *Wonderland of the South*, 165.

210 On how the industrialization and increasing commodification of Mexican urban life resulted in a pronounced visibility of women in public spaces, see Carmen Ramos Escandón, “Señoritas Porfirianas: Mujeres e ideología en el México progresista, 1880-1910,” in *Presencia y Transparencia: La mujer en la historia de México*, ed.

Carmen Ramos Escandón (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992), 143-163.

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“Gardenias,” or “La Popular” fronted with flowers or “Primrose” with a surprisingly nonsexual woman smoker on the cover. [211](#)

The famous Buen Tono cartoons which usually advertised Canela Pura and other more “masculine” brands (with male smokers) featured “Gardenias” in one memorable storyline adaptation of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” The Condesa de Nogales, alarmed by the costliness and extravagance of fashion decides to hold a congressional hearing of elite women to decide on what to do. Gridlocked, the meeting is saved by the arrival of a shabbily dressed old crone who advises that “Gardenias” are the “true mark of

supreme elegance” and all that a classy lady needs. The next day women walk the city streets dressed deplorably but smoking “Gardenias,” an action that leads fashion store owners to replace the clothes in their display windows with towers of “Gardenia” cigarettes. [212](#) By connecting the farcical notion of women abandoning fashion in favour of smoking the advertisement follows a favourite device of Buen Tono cartoons: the depiction of a Rabelaisian world turned upside down. On the one hand this might appear to support respectable society’s proscription against female tobacco consumption by linking two seemingly implausible occurrences. On the other hand, the use of humour in this and in other Buen Tono cartoons afforded protective cover for making trenchant observations on Porfirian social reality. In this case the image of women smoking reinforced the brand name and image to clearly focus the marketing of “Gardenias”

to female consumers. The end result is that the cigarette companies targeted their products at a broad spectrum of urban female consumers as part of a larger strategy of plumbing the 211 See *El Mundo Ilustrado*, April 15, 1906, 8 for the best graphic record of the packaging for 22 brands produced by Buen Tono at the time. One example of the Tabacalera’s female-oriented brands is “Damitas,” *El Correo de Chihuahua*, Mar. 12, 1906, 4.

212 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 31, 1909, 8. See also *The Mexican Herald*, Oct. 9, 1904, 3 for another cartoon advertisement for Gardenias.

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depths of a potential “deep” market that crossed economic, social, gender, and even age lines. [213](#)

In targeting these niche markets advertisers of cigarettes and other branded goods fostered a new cultural category of identity: that of the consumer or, more specifically in an age of nationalism, the consumer-citizen. Journalists and other social observers contributed to this formation, promoting the idea that with each purchase a citizen assists the economy and therefore the

nation. In the face of a dampened political discourse and lost political rights stripped away during the Porfiriato, business sectors consciously or not increasingly substituted the concept that the power of the purchase could assuage the loss of the power of the vote. The tobacco industry provides us with the finest example of this phenomenon with its highly publicized and spectacularized fight during the Unión Mercantil boycott of 1906 in which companies appealed to this new notion of consumer voice and power.

The tobacco companies already had a history of public disputes in which they appealed to consumers to make their voices heard through their purchases. What became known as the Bonsack controversy was the longest lasting. Involving a dispute over patent rights, the Bonsack controversy pitted Buen Tono as the plaintiff claiming that its Decoufflé 213 Considerable evidence points to the marketing of cigarettes to—and ready acceptance by—Mexican children and youths. Among other similar advertisements, the Tabacalera represented its brand “Flor de Canela” as a cure for crying children, depicting an inconsolable toddler rejecting a milk bottle, a ball, and a toy horse before smiling happily with a cigarette in his mouth. *El Imparcial*, Nov. 16, 1905, 4. The newspaper *La Clase Media* reflected the values of the *gente decente* as it occasionally pointed out the health and costs of smoking (especially by children) as it fought a losing battle against the contrary arguments of the tobacco companies and many doctors. An example is an article reproducing a conversation between two pre-adolescent children, one a smoker and the other not. After rejecting an offered cigarette the abstainer first recounts how his dad caught him smoking and made him smoke the whole cigarette and then continues with an argument against smoking before concluding with the middle-class mantra, “Those who smoke save their health, time, and money.” *La Clase Media*, Feb. 6, 1910, 4. Ten years later, in 1919, the moral debate over juvenile smoking as part of a larger package of youthful vices reached the chambers of the Municipal Council in Mexico. Arguments in council never translated into action as many dismissed the dangers. One councilor drolly suggested that children caught smoking should be taken to the home of one anti-smoking council member and forced to play piano for a quarter of an hour. Patience Schell, “Teaching the Children of the Revolution: Church and State Education in Mexico City, 1917-1926,” (Ph.D. diss., St. Anthony’s College, Oxford University, 1998), 144-145.

machines and their glue-free rolling technology possessed a 20 year patent and that the Bonsack machines newly employed by the Tabacalera and other smaller competitors had infringed upon the company's patent rights. During a dispute that lasted through three major court decisions before culminating in a Supreme Court judgement favouring the plaintiff, both sides published page-long articles in the major papers and received comment by a broad spectrum of the press. [214](#) Following the Bonsack case, in 1905 Buen Tono responded to market inroads made by the Tabacalera and savaged its opponent for trademark infringement.

Not even bothering with the judicial system, Buen Tono took its case before the court of public opinion. It argued that the Tabacalera stole and slightly modified Buen Tono names for its own products. Buen Tono certainly had a legitimate claim, citing such examples as

“Canela Pura” turned to “Flor de Canela,” “La Yucateca” transformed to “Yucatecos,” and

“Chorritos” to “Chorrito-Sirenas.” [215](#) Nevertheless, the Tabacalera retaliated with ads illustrated with working-class Mexicans disputing the charges and by publishing articles asking consumers to view its ads located in tramcars and other public places that visually compared each pair of brands and demonstrated the complete packaging dissimilarities between the two. [216](#) To gain further public support and sympathy throughout these private-legal-turned-public controversies each side peppered each other with charges of mistreatment of their mostly female workers and crowed about their own labour practices. They [214](#) For a description and history of the Bonsack machines, see W. Hamish Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850-1914* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1981), 70. The Spanish-, French-, and English-language newspapers all covered the case by printing lengthy articles usually produced by one side or the other. A smattering of

stories printed includes *El Imparcial*, Sept 22, 1899, 2; Dec. 22, 1899, 2; Apr. 19, 1900, 3; Apr.

29, 1900, 6; May 2, 1900, 3; May 4, 1900, 3; May 7, 1900, 3; May 9, 1900, 3; May 11, 1900, 3; May 19, 1900, 3; Nov. 24, 1900, 3; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 28, 1900, 3; Jan. 30, 1901, 3; and *The Mexican Herald*, May 7, 1900, 5.

215 *El Imparcial*, Dec. 26, 1905, 2; Jan. 3, 1906, 2; and Jan. 19, 1906, 2.

216 My favourite Tabacalera advertisement features a sandal-wearing Indian named Doroteo dressed in a modern jacket and pant combination sitting on a bench smoking a Flor de Canela and declaring the controversy ridiculous (“Todo eso son papas!!”), *El Imparcial*, Jan. 12, 1906, 6. As for its defense that the package designs and colours completely differ, see *El Imparcial*, Dec. 27, 1905, 2; and Dec. 31, 1905, 2. *La Gaceta de Policia*, Feb. 11, 1906, 6, announced the placement of Tabacalera advertisements comparing the two sets of brands.

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frequently resorted to the popular technique of personal testimonials from their own employees to make their case. [217](#)

Into this already existing public discourse entered the Unión Mercantil affair. The Unión began as a commercial association made up mostly of *abarroteros*, or owners of small food, tobacco, and beverage retail establishments; in essence, they were corner store owners.

Mostly Spanish, the association elected Antero Muñuzuri as its first president in 1894 with the stated aim of reducing adulteration of its wares and eliminating the circulation of false money in its stores (a national problem). [218](#) In February of 1906 the association decided to raise its commission of 25% on each pack of cigarettes sold. Every tobacco

company agreed except for Buen Tono. As a result, on February 15 the Unión boycotted Buen Tono as a way of bringing the company to its knees. ²¹⁹ Instead, Buen Tono fought back.

The company initiated a two-pronged attack consisting of the creation of an alternate retailing network and a media blitz portraying itself as a defender of the consumer on whom the company relied for its existence. Buen Tono launched an army of sandwich-board men and basket-carrying cigarette girls (*cantinneras*) to sell their products. Publishing photos of these two groups in the press, the company described its plan and expressed the logic in a two full-page text and photo advertisement entitled “The mobile army of ‘El Buen Tono,’

S.A.” It noted that “This important cigarette factory which enjoys so much public favour, is constantly devising new ways to facilitate for its consumers the use of its accredited brands, so well known in all of the Republic.” One of these new ideas was the service of male ²¹⁷ For one example of the Tabacalera touting its pay and labour relations see *El Imparcial*, Feb. 5, 1906, 3.

Two examples of Buen Tono worker testimonials, see *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 17, 1906, 2; and Jan. 21, 1906, 2.

²¹⁸ *L’Echo du Mexique*, Sept. 12, 1894, 2. Significantly, the Unión recognized the national reach of Buen Tono’s market and voted in March “to extend the propaganda, publishing a manifesto and sending circulars to the states of the Republic.” *El Imparcial*, March 20, 1906, 2.

²¹⁹ *La Gaceta de Policia*, Feb. 11, 1906, 14.

vendors on whose sandwich boards was written, “YES, I SELL BUEN TONO

CIGARETTES BECAUSE THEY ARE PREFERRED BY THE PUBLIC.” Assisting this mobile army was a group of *cantineras* to better the success of their “bellicose operations.”

The girls “are beautiful, uniformed youths with true elegance and are wearing hats of the best taste” who carry their wares for sale in the Alameda, San Francisco and Plateros streets, the Zócalo and Chapultepec Park; “that is to say, the most central and aristocratic sites where the most enthusiastic consumers of Buen Tono cigarettes pass their time.” The article claimed that this new effort provided “proof that the Buen Tono would not spare any expense that would benefit and comfort the consumer.” After listing all the brands available for purchase the argument concluded with a laundry list of why the company earned the support of the public, including its awards from expositions, the construction of its magnificent factory with the “most modern machines, like those which absorb the dust from the tobacco leaving it completely clean and hygienic,” and “procuring all the means possible to please the consumer . . . and merits for this the applause of all smokers of good taste.” [220](#)

Buen Tono also practiced a strategy of dividing the opposition. It listed its supporters, including 43 cigarette retailers (*depósitos*) and 45 members of the Unión who did not participate in the boycott. [221](#) To further peel away support it published monthly lists of its sales, painting a picture of increasing revenues and a failing boycott effort. [222](#)

Within a month, the Tabacalera entered the fray. The reasons are unclear, except for the possibility that the Tabacalera ownership was Spanish and one of its founding members was Antero Muñozuri, the first president of the Unión and owner of the now-defunct *El 220 El Mundo Ilustrado*, March 4, 1906. See versions of this in *El Imparcial*, Feb. 22, 1906, 6; and Feb. 25, 1906, 8.

221 For a listing of the establishments consult *El Imparcial*, Mar. 1, 1906, 3.

222 For one of the many accounts of company sales, see *El Imparcial*, June 6, 1906, 6. I have selected this for citation because it also includes the percentage of sales made by the ambulatory vendors.

Negrito cigarette factory. It declared the army of “Sandwiches” a failure, publishing cartoons in which they are run out of town. [223](#) Buen Tono shot back with rising sales figures.

The Tabacalera created rhyming ads accompanied by sketches playing on social attitudes towards women on the street to question the morality of the *cantinneras*. In one advertisement entitled “One Who is Sorry,” a gentleman in top hat and tails takes a demoralized *cantinnera* by the arm. He points at a nearby poster advertising the phenomenal \$20,000 Tabacalera lottery prize and advises her that it is “best not to expose yourself to the mirth of the people! You will see, if you are true, that there is no small difference between a lady of the house and a street salesgirl.” [224](#) Buen Tono countered with a letter signed by 25

of the girls angered at being compared with “las mujeres sin honor,” a barely coded term for prostitutes. They finished by writing that they were responding in their own way, “as many others are,” to “the ignoble campaign that some businesses are waging against Buen Tono.” [225](#)

As these examples have suggested, Buen Tono used the real or imagined voices of individuals to convey a sense of consumer participation and empowerment. It is this construction of a public discourse, of a consumer discourse, that is most striking during this debate. Buen Tono frequently cited “our numerous consumers” for supporting them, even creating the powerful image of the company, “surrounded and favoured by its consumers so that they must necessarily win however many battles are forced upon it.” [226](#) Both sides constantly appealed to consumers to vote with their pesos. One maverick shopkeeper who [223](#) A long-running cartoon that reached beyond the capital, the Tabacalera entitled its first shot “The First Defeat of the Sandwich Army”, *El Correo de Chihuahua*, June 23, 1906, 4. Buen Tono’s retort came in *El Imparcial*, March 16, 1906, 3.

224 *El Correo de Chihuahua*, Apr. 18, 1906, 4.

225 *El Imparcial*, March 4, 1906, 2.

226 For two examples of “our numerous consumers” quotes, see *El Imparcial*, Feb. 20, 1906, 3; and *Le Courrier du Mexique*, March 1, 1906, 4. For the “circle the wagons” image, see *El Imparcial*, March 16, 1906, 3.

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supported Buen Tono wrote a letter to one newspaper repeating the power of consumers five times. He concluded with the advice that when a shopkeeper tells a customer that he does not sell Buen Tono brands he should simply inform the owner that he will choose to go next door and buy not only his cigarettes but all his other groceries. [227](#)

The counterattack won. Buen Tono’s sales increased and the Unión dropped the boycott after several months. Buen Tono’s brilliant strategy of winning over consumers and excoriating its opponents in its cartoons, ads, and press columns combined with its deep pockets to carry the day. Pugibet’s side convincingly portrayed their Goliath as David. The instructive aspect of this battle lies not in who won, but rather in the crash-course of consumer choice sponsored by the company. Buen Tono’s rhetoric and actions empowered Mexican citizen-consumers, giving them the opportunity to feel in control of their life through purchases, to feel modern. In the absence of political democracy Mexicans could at least feel a sense of possessing a consumer democracy.

The irony of this discourse is that just as its rhetoric of consumer democracy and choice reached its peak the industry was monopolizing and ossifying just like the Porfirian political system. Within eight months Buen Tono had purchased the Cigarrera and moved it next door. [228](#) Two years later the company bought out the Tabacalera. [229](#) Much as Porfirio Díaz kept the illusion of democracy and political options the cigarette companies

kept the appearance of free markets and competition by maintaining separate companies and keeping 227 Published simultaneously in *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 23, 1906, 3; and *El Imparcial*, Feb. 24, 1906, 2.

228 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 1, 1906, 3, details the sale. *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 29, 1907, 3

announces the transfer of the factory.

229 Consult two sources on the sale of the Tabacalera: *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 21, 1908, 3; and *La Semana Mercantil*, Mar. 2, 1908, 117. The fact of this merger has been erased in official tobacco history today in Mexico. The Tabacalera Mexicana is the name of the only large Mexican cigarette manufacturer remaining, although it is in reality owned by British American Tobacco. In the company's official history of tobacco in Mexico it tells of Buen Tono's absorption by foreign tobacco interests in the 1930s but says nothing of the 1908

purchase or its own ascent as a front for foreign capital. See Amerlinck, *Historia y cultura del tabaco en México*.

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spectacles and advertising at a high level. All the while the Buen Tono conglomerate denied the reality of monopoly. Again Porfirian politics and business met in the importance of illusion and appearances for the maintenance of the status quo. [230](#)

Conclusions

The growth of a sophisticated consumer market developing during the Porfiriato provided the context for the rise of the Buen Tono cigarette company as a political, economic, and cultural force in Mexico. Its marketing strategies provide vivid insight as to how Mexican modernity and development were stated and affirmed through the medium of consumer goods during this era. Buen Tono, Tabacalera Mexicana, and Cigarrera Mexicana positioned themselves at the forefront of a broad-based cultural movement shaping—and in turn shaped by—both a distinctly Mexican consumer culture and urban culture.

The tobacco industry and the cigarette were uniquely suited both economically and culturally to fill the position at the vanguard of the modernization process in Mexico. The confluence of urbanization, industrialization, and political and economic centralization and concentration provided the conditions for increases in both tobacco production and consumption. For good reason did tobacco become one of the first and widely embraced products of modern consumer culture at home and abroad. ²³¹ First, tobacco pre-existed as a mass-consumed commodity. Not surprisingly, along with textiles it became one of the first

²³⁰ For a good account of the image and illusion of the Porfirian regime, see Victor Manuel Macías González,

“The Mexican Aristocracy and Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911” (Ph.D. diss, Texas Christian University, 1999), 142-202, and 236-284.

²³¹ Some of the best work on the introduction and rise of tobacco as a global commodity includes: Carole Shammas, *The Preindustrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Carole Shammas, “Changes in Anglo-American consumption from 1550 to 1800” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 177-205.

items of mass consumption to achieve mechanized production. Simultaneously its producers adopted the new retailing model of selling cheap and selling often. This strategy sold a new way of living that fused consumption, spectacle, and novelty—the essential conditions of modernity.

Both the form of production and strategies for marketing machine-rolled cigarettes poured new meaning into the once-lowly commodity and made it an icon of Mexican progress. No longer small-scale, cigarette production was mechanized, hygienic, and conducted in enormous factories requiring great amounts of investment capital and conducted under the most modern methods of organization. Little wonder advertisers used images of the factories, machines, and other connections to production. [232](#) Consumers could see, feel, and taste the difference that these changes made. Uniformly crisp and neatly crimped rolling paper visibly improved upon hand-rolled or glued cigarettes of old. Even better, machine-rolled cigarettes were less expensive than their predecessors. Moreover, modern packaging exceeded older versions in both quality and aesthetics, as shiny aluminum foil combined with colourful lithographic images to add an element of sensory pleasure and sharply distinguish between brands. For many, all the talk of national progress could be distilled into the dramatic improvements made to the cigarette.

Publicity campaigns reinforced this popular association of the cigarette with progress.

Unlike ever before, linking the latest technologies and images of abundance to cigarettes helped to popularly disseminate the vision of linear progress and promise of earthly utopia so forcefully and ubiquitously promoted by western societies in the decades prior to World War I. In Mexico, this vague society-wide sense of progress more concisely termed the “Porfirian 232 For visuals of Buen Tono advertisements featuring the main factory and its machinery, see Bunker,

“‘Consumers of Good Taste’”, 234-236.

persuasion” [233](#) received concrete reinforcement not just by actions of the government but also by business as demonstrated by El Buen Tono and others sponsoring free public displays of the dirigible, the airplane, the automobile, the cinema, and other spectacles of technology.

Cigarette company spectacles recognized and shaped the new urban mass culture developing throughout western societies. The idea of constituting and entertaining “the crowd” became a staple of these urban societies, whether in Paris, London, New York, or Mexico City. [234](#) An important part of this was the concept of leisure time and perhaps its increasing amount. Urban spectacles—whether sponsored by tobacco companies or not—

filled in this time created by the growing division in both social reality and perception between home and employment, work and “play,” a distinct time for production and that for consumption. Leisure was not something enjoyed by a few but rather for all levels of urban society, occurring in the interstices between home and work (such as the free cinema) as well as evenings, holidays, and Sundays. The quantity of this leisure time for many may appear limited by today’s standards but by contemporary measures urban life was far easier and offered far more free time than a rural existence as Eugen Weber demonstrates while looking at the same phenomenon in France. [235](#)

Some may be tempted to describe this as an example of mass marketing, as the making of mass culture. This is true to the extent that advertisers mounted national print campaigns and organized public spectacles attracting a mass of consumers. Undoubtedly these campaigns could be described as large scale but they cannot be described as [233](#) Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, 181.

234 Two excellent studies of “the crowd” as a cultural production in *fin-de-siècle* Paris are Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*; and Gregory Shaya, “The Flâneur, the Badard, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860-1910,” *American Historical Review*, 109, no.1 (February 2004): 41-77.

235 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976). In particular, see pages 278-302.

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homogenizing in the way that many scholars have approached the impact of consumerism and twentieth-century societies. [236](#) A careful look at the Porfirian tobacco industry demonstrates that advertisers practiced niche marketing that divided that mass of consumers into distinct categories and, indeed, spoke a language that appealed to recipients as an independent entity, as a consumer. This makes sense if we consider that goods can and often do fulfill both utilitarian and cultural needs. Consumers construct and reinforce self- and reference group identities from the cultural meaning invested in goods that they acquire.

This helps to explain why an analysis of Porfirian cigarette marketing suggests that the achievement of a mass market required niche marketing. Cigarettes proved an ideal commodity for this kind of distinction because the product, packaging, and advertising could be so easily “tweaked” all the while satisfying the narcotic cravings of the consumer. Mere differences in the quality of tobacco cannot explain why Buen Tono alone marketed dozens of brands segmenting the market into categories such as class, gender, age, and race. Rather than looking exclusively for a top-down analysis of consumption and advertising—whether that approach is for the imposition of cultural homogeneity or that of an elite social vision of an ordered social hierarchy—we should consider that balancing mass advertising with niche-marketing represents a shift in how and where

people derive meaning in modern market societies and serves as an example of companies catering to the tastes of consumers to win them over.

236 Perhaps the most influential and pessimistic views of twentieth century mass society and the role of consumerism in its manipulation comes from the Frankfurt school. Representative of its approach and most relevant to this statement is the work of Theodor Adorno although other founding members—Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin—echo Adorno. For an overview of Adorno's approach to this issue see Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001). For a more contemporary view of the hegemonic, homogenizing, and opiating impact of advertising and consumer culture on modern society, see the works of Stuart Ewen including *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

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To a certain extent this chapter is a business history of the industrializing of tobacco manufacturing during the Porfiriato. In and of itself, tracking the rise of the machine-rolled and then glueless cigarette, the mechanization and consolidation of the industry, and finally the development and execution of an elaborate marketing campaign documents an important and entertaining chapter in Mexican history. Making this far more significant is attempting to understand how the simple machine-rolled cigarette became such a cultural icon during the Porfiriato. Company advertising, new production technologies and popular attitudes towards the cigarette all invested this mass commodity into a metaphor for national hope and progress. Industrially produced, aesthetically pleasing, and dirt cheap, the cigarette became a highly visible and accessible benefit derived from the Porfirian development model. This quality combined with a national distribution network and the marketing savvy of industry leaders made the

cigarette an ideal receptacle for meaning and symbolic values. Possession of this commodity conferred upon its owner a chance to be modern, on the cutting edge of the historical moment. In the end, an analysis of the cigarette serves as one method by which to illuminate the rise and role of business and commodities as important brokers in transmitting and negotiating meaning in modern Mexican society.

Chapter Two

“For a Peso More”: Porfirian Advertising

Late in September of 1909 Augusto Agacino again sought career assistance from his *patrón*, none other than Finance Minister José Yves Limantour. Two years earlier, the recently-married and broke Agacino had begged Limantour for a job which Limantour arranged at the *Buen Tono* cigarette company. [237](#) Now, as a socially ambitious and financially extended Porfirian *capitalino*, he tapped into his social resources yet again: “As for me—as I frequently think and search for a way of making one more peso—I have come across a way that could satiate these longings, that is if you would be ever so kind as to back my endeavour. . .” He outlined his plan to obtain a concession to post advertisements from wooden triangles attached to all street lampposts. In return he would relieve the government of the financial burden of repainting, replacing, and inspecting the posts. [238](#) The next day Agacino received a supportive response. He immediately replied with a letter even more sycophantic than the first, promising to post advertisements with “artistic merit” that would beautify rather than besmirch the City’s appearance. [239](#)

How should we interpret Agacino and the world of Porfirian advertising?

Unfortunately we have little guidance on the subject. The sparse numbers of existing studies focus on an analysis of advertising content and its messages. [240](#) Their approaches tend to 237 JYL to Ernesto Pugibet, Mexico City, November 22, 1907, CDLIV 1907, Roll 45, Carp. 16, Archivo

José Yves Limantour, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México
CONDUMEX, Chimalistac, Mexico City.

Hereafter cited as JYL-CONDUMEX.

238 Agacino to JYL, Mexico City, September 28, 1909, CDLIV 1909, Roll 63, Carp. 28, JYL-CONDUMEX.

239 Agacino to JYL, Mexico City, September 30, 1909, CDLIV 1909, Roll 63, Carp. 28, JYL-CONDUMEX.

240 Phyllis Smith, "Contentious Voices Amid the Order: The Porfirian Press in Mexico City, 1876-1911," (Ph.D.

diss., University of Arizona, 1996), especially Chapter 6, "Porfirian Advertising and the Creation of a Consumer Culture." Nora Pérez-Rayon, "La publicidad en México a fines del siglo XIX: Expresión del progreso económico y la modernidad porfirista, transmisora de nuevos valores y modelos culturales,"

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rely on a narrow segment of possible sources, namely advertisements in newspapers, and those newspapers often restricted to the big dailies and weeklies such as the group organized by Rafael Reyes Spindola. This parochialism produces conclusions that are at odds with those expressed by the individual voices and numerous mediums which made up the world of Porfirian advertising.

An examination of the social and cultural landscape of Porfirian advertising reveals a broad-based and deep-rooted embrace of consumerism that included significant participation from the working class and, more generally, the subordinate classes. This does not imply a simplistic image of

homogenized mass consumption. Far from it. The variety of goods and advertising strategies suggests a deeply fractured consumer market in which the consumer's cultural worldview determined meaning and use patterns of goods as much as the cultural value added by the advertiser.

Conducting this study involves not only a greater range of newspapers but also the inclusion of a number of less traditional sources--memoirs, personal papers, travel accounts, advertising patent applications, photographs, and even finds from Mexico's flea markets.

Allowing historical actors and archival information to speak for themselves provide more than just an opportunity to glimpse the excitement, colour, and variety of daily life during the Porfiriato. It demonstrates that historians have often overlooked the sheer fascination of goods, advertising, and technology possessed by people from across the social spectrum. It raises the issue of popular consumption and its significance which, in turn, brings new clarity *Sociológica* 9, no. 2 (September-December 1994): 195-226, is the most narrow of all these studies (a single newspaper for a single year) yet makes the broadest claims about the nature and impact of Porfirian advertising.

For more on the advertising images in the Porfirian press, see Julieta Ortiz Gaitán, *Imágenes del deseo: Arte y publicidad en la prensa ilustrada Mexicana (1894-1939)* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003); and Thelma Camacho Morfín, *Imágenes de México: Las historietas de El Buen Tono de Juan B. Urrutia, 1909-1912* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2002).

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to our understanding of the material culture, interests, and mentality of subordinate classes.

It questions the portrayal of Porfirian lower classes as uninterested non-consumers. It suggests that the seeming paradox of cultural conservatism

and curiosity towards novelty existed in popular culture, that incorporating modernizing goods and possessing a vision of a better future did not mean agreeing with their social superordinates on either the image of that utopia or the means of achieving it. When we consider the range of advertisers, their backgrounds, their thoughts, their aims, and the actual conditions in which they worked it dispels the myth of a coordinated message and the image of a monolithic culture industry. In short, an overview examination of the forms of advertising in *fin-de-siècle* Mexico offers an opportunity to assess the impact, limitations, and serendipity of the Porfirian modernizing project.

Returning to Agacino, we can safely deduce from his social connections that he was a member of the *gente decente*, Mexico's leading social class defined as much by cultural as economic distinctions from the rest of society. His pursuit of a career in advertising, his comfortable interaction with the State, and his claim to use his contract to apply gente decente standards of good taste to public space further suggest that he shared the modernizing vision and values of his class. We need to keep in mind, however, that for Agacino this was a job, a livelihood, a way to stay afloat in a modern world in which decencies—let alone luxuries—seemed to multiply and in a city where the cost of living appeared only to increase. If asked about the utility of his new occupation as an ad agent or space-broker, he would quite likely have responded that he was providing a public service and increasing sales for his clients by linking advertiser and consumer, perhaps have added that he assisted national progress by stimulating commercial activity, and might have further 97

insisted on his aesthetic contribution to the city's streets. His reasoning would have been economic and aesthetic and not cultural. He would not have said, let alone consciously considered, that he was helping to shape the city in a way that made the values of his class and its vision of society and the future a concrete reality. Yet through his actions he plunged into a larger cultural battle within Mexican society in which each social class

endeavoured through a variety of means to shape a rapidly transforming capital into its own image.

Cultural Forms of Advertising

Agacino was no path breaker; advertising did not originate in the Porfiriato. The origins of its cultural forms began early in the colonial period and became much more recognizable as the era of mercantile economy drew to a close and the Republic began.

These forms were often non-commercial in origin, and those that were commercial often had other goals such as social organization as their primary aim.

In the capital the Zócalo represented the center of political and religious power and wealth and so it is not surprising that it and the surrounding streets became a natural location for the trades and other businesses in Mexico. Colonial consumers knew exactly where to find what they needed not just through experience but also because of the tradition of grouping guilds on specific streets. This led to the naming of each thoroughfare for its tenants (Plateros and Tlapeleros quickly come to mind) and thus helped to orient consumers. [241](#) Shop signs and posters can trace one line of history to 1571 when the City Council supported by the viceroy ordered that taverns must only sell one type of wine and [241](#) Salvador Novo, *Apuntes para una historia de la publicidad en la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Organización Editorial Novaro, S.A. 1967), 91-93.

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designate its provenance with a cloth on the door: white if Spanish wine; black if New World in origin. [242](#)

The language of advertising (at least its most effective) draws its memorable qualities from antediluvian cultural forms that continue today.

Slogans and jingles are little more than proverbs and other mnemonic devices adapted to commercial ends. ²⁴³ More specific to Mexico is the use of *décimas* or ten-line stanzas that proper society and institutions (such as the Church in its sermons and plays) employ for moral exhortation but street and advertising applications adapt to humourous and pranksterish forms. ²⁴⁴ Both respectable merchants and less-esteemed hawkers or peddlers employed creative visual and verbal forms of advertising to attract customers on the streets or in markets such as the massive Parián that occupied the Plaza Mayor, the Portales, and spilled into adjoining streets. We know that retailers used instruments and music to attract the attention of passers-by despite official attempts in the Early Republic to stifle the dulcet tones of “whistles and drums.” Santa Anna sought to crack down on this urban cacophony when in 1834 he supported a ban on “youths advertising by way of [songs and verse] the sale of anything” and threatened incarceration for transgressors. ²⁴⁵

The visual elements of advertising developed lockstep with the aural. In the Early Republic the quantity of urban advertising paraphernalia was sufficient for a prohibition of any advertisements attached to poles located in the street and the specification that they must ²⁴² *Ibid.*, 103-105.

²⁴³ Non-rhyming popular sayings, or *dichos*, could also be employed to encourage consumption. One such example comes from a New Year’s ad for the home and office furnishing company Mosler, Bowen and Cook:

“An old saying says that to put a good foot forward in the new year one should exhibit something new, such as adorning a home with an object of relative value as a demonstration of prosperity and well-being.”

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 81-85. See pages 83-84 for an exchange between *criollo* and *peninsular* merchants in the Parián market. On *décimas* and their broader context see Patrick Frank, *Posada’s Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 169-170.

²⁴⁵ Novo, *Apuntes*, 129.

be attached to the cornices of store doors. [246](#) Fanny Calderón de la Barca corroborates these visual displays when she noted that early in the morning of a scheduled bullfight promoters ensured that “placards were put up, as I understand, on all the corners of the streets, announcing it. . .” [247](#) The first advertising agency in Mexico City opened in 1865. [248](#)

Information and entertainment characterized these advertising forms. Every marketing device sought in some way to gain the attention of a consumer and then entertain, humour, hoodwink, and sometimes surprise and delight him or her into making a purchase.

The power of the spectacle and the qualities of the carnivalesque informed much of early advertising. These qualities continued to characterize the most effective Mexican advertising throughout the nineteenth century and the Porfiriato.

Advertising Agents & Space Brokers

Our man Agacino did not fall into this creative category. He was a space broker, the primary role of most advertising agencies during the Porfiriato. Except near the end of the Porfiriato most ad agencies did not provide copywriting and artistic services to their clientele.

An 1867 Mexican business directory listed a single ad agency (the same mentioned above) owned by a Frenchman yet by the turn of the century another guide listed nine agencies.

These sources are not inclusive and solid evidence suggests more. [249](#) The related advertising [246](#) *Ibid.*, 131.

247 Fanny Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (London: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1917), 74.

248 Yolanda Zamora Casillas, “Alacena publicitaria,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 109

(1982): 50-51, cited in Smith, “Contentious Voices,” 153.

249 The 1867 source is Eugenio Maillefert, *Directorio del Comercio del Imperio Mexicano para el año de 1867*

(México: E. Maillefert, 1867), 244. The lone advertising agency was the Agencia General de Avisos managed by Fermin Marchand. This was Mexico’s first documented agency. Established in 1865 it had representatives in Paris and New York. Noted in Zamora Casillas, “Alacena publicitaria,” 50-51. The later source is: J.

Figueroa Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*, vol. 1 (México: Ramón de S. N.

Araluce, 1899), 651. The *Guía* is a more reliable source than most business directories which definitely charged for the privilege for a listing. Whether the *Guía* did the same is unclear, yet the number of listed 100

novelty establishments that sold signs, customer gifts, and other advertising paraphernalia increased during the same period from zero to five—again, a likely conservative figure. [250](#)

Space brokers sold advertisements to merchants and businessmen and then bought space to fill the orders. This occupation is usually associated with newspapers and for good reason as this is the way that members of the press typically sold off their advertising, either through freelance space merchants or those acting as formal agents of the press. A newspaper advertising

contract from the Palacio de Hierro provides the format and details of such an arrangement. At the end of 1892 the store signed an agreement with the Hermann agency located in the capital. The agency typed on its form the promise to procure insertions in the following Mexico City papers: *El Tiempo*, *El Monitor Republicano*, *El Universal*, *La Nacional*, *The Two Republics*, *El Correo Español*, and *El Voz de México*. In addition, an insertion would be included in each of the following populations: Chihuahua, Guadalajara, San Luis Potosi, Monterrey, Puebla, and Veracruz. Julio Tron—the Director of the store—

wrote in the size (24 x 36, presumably centimetres), the location (third and fourth page), and the day of publication (preferably Sunday). The agency did not create the ads, a task businesses in all categories far exceeds those found in other contemporary business guides. Despite this, I am certain that numerous smaller agencies remained unlisted, such as that of José D. Gayosso who first announced his establishment in *L'Echo du Mexique*, June 14, 1894, 2. More puzzling is the absence of David Camacho, the indefatigable advertiser and promoter whose company established in 1892, whose newspaper, *Oferta y Demanda*, received inaugural recognition from his press competition in 1897 (*L'Echo du Mexique*, Mar. 18, 1897, 2) and whose correspondence regularly included Finance Minister José Yves Limantour from whom he requested permission to initiate projects backed by big retail and manufacturing names such as the Palacio de Hierro, the Puerto de Veracruz, and the Cerveceria Cuauhtémoc. Camacho to JYL, Mexico City, N.D., CDLIV

1883-1899, Roll 3, Doc. 2214, JYL-CONDUMEX; and Camacho to JYL, Mexico City, Nov. 21, 1899, CDLIV

1883-1899 Roll 3 Doc. 2221, JYL-CONDUMEX. A sample of additional companies include: John H. Greaves

& Co. (*The Mexican Herald*, May 6, 1900, 3); Compañía de Anuncios Mexicanos, S.A. (J.R. Southworth to JYL, Mexico City, March, 1904, CDLIV 1904, Roll 28, Carp. 20, JYL-CONDUMEX); Empresa Explotadora del Anuncio de Movimiento sobre Vehiculos (*La Clase Media*, July 1, 1908, 3); and The Publicity Company (*The Mexican Herald*, Jan. 1, 1906, 3; Jan. 21, 1906, 12; May 27, 1906, 23).

250 *The Massey-Gilbert Blue Book of Mexico: A Directory in English of the City of Mexico* (México: The Massey-Gilbert Company, 1901), 189.

Additional firms include José Bianchi, Artículos Anunciadores (*El Imparcial*, Aug. 17, 1904, 1) and Wright Bros. Novedades para Anunciantes (Wright Brothers to JYL, Mexico City, Sept. 2, 1908, CDLIV 1907, Roll 48, Carp. 26, JYL-CONDUMEX).

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reserved for an in-house department of an establishment as large and advertising-conscious as the Palacio. The contract began in January 1893, lasted for a year, and would involve 248

insertions in the capital and 310 in the Interior. The fee would be \$4200 for the year. Tron also jotted down the right of the Palacio de Hierro to change the texts of the ads once per week in the Capital and once a month in the other cities. [251](#) This extensive contract helps to demonstrate the pursuit and attainment of a national market by some economic sectors not to mention the capacity of larger agencies such as Hermann to provide the nationwide publicity needs of their clients.

José Juan Tablada reveals another form of newspaper space brokerage outside of an official agency. In this case the advertising agent formally worked for the newspaper.

Among his numerous pursuits Tablada wrote social commentaries and observations in his column for *El Imparcial*. In his memoir he humourously recounts the state of newspaper advertising in the Porfiriato. [252](#) He had just decided to build a new house on land purchased in Coyoacán from the proceeds of a wine selling venture. To finance its construction he expanded his writing job at *El Imparcial* to include the position of space broker/advertising agent. One of his first clients was José Sánchez Juárez,

the owner of the country's first and largest automobile retail and garage service, whom he had met through his wine business.

Tablada notes that as an advertiser in *El Imparcial* Sánchez Juárez “had the right to various services and claims whose importance depended on the skill and activity of the advertising agent.” ²⁵³ This means that ad agents such as Tablada were often contributors to the paper who could squeeze clients into their regular copy as well as sell them formal advertising ²⁵¹

Advertising contract, Copiador 1889-1903, p.34, Archivo Palacio de Hierro, Mexico City.

²⁵² José Juan Tablada, *Las Sombras Largas* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993), 255-258.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 257.

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space. So Tablada gave the business of Sánchez Juárez “a level of publicity that today would have cost enormous sums but at the time it didn't cost the business more than the wage it paid me.” He did this through frequent mentions in his columns of both the garage specifically as well as automobiling generally.

At some point Sánchez Juárez decided to save some money and suspended his advertising. With this act, Tablada writes that “Suddenly, I who had enthusiastically treated the automobile question, felt invaded by an absolute skepticism and had to ask myself: what use is an automobile?” He published an article answering this question with a litany of complaints against the poor roads, the unreliability of the vehicles, and the danger to pedestrians. This soon produced a following article entitled “Biography of an Automobile”

in which a young dandy, a “fifi,” buys a car to have drinks in Toluca and purchase twenty chorizo sausages for his mother. The car is destroyed by the roads on the way home, and Tablada wonders if this “fifi” considers that each of those sausages for his “voluminous mother” cost nearly 500 pesos each after accounting for the cost of the car. As Tablada impishly concludes, the following day Sánchez Juárez, “with his best smile, told me that he was reinstating my position as advertising agent.” [254](#) In this account Tablada highlights the informality, “amateurishness,” and reliance on personal relationships between publishers and clients that one suspects characterized much of Porfirian advertising. Not necessarily a bad thing, these qualities suggest the freshness and creativity of a service welling up from its social and cultural setting before stultifying professionalism and bureaucracy formalized and systematized the field. Tablada also illustrates that publisher and client recognized that for mass-circulation newspapers fuelled by advertising revenue the line separating advertisements from unpaid copy was a porous one.

254 *Ibid.*, 257-258.

The purview of space brokers extended far beyond the confines of the newspaper. As a group, ad agents were distributors of visual marketing texts whose primary goal was to plant as many ads as possible before the eyes of the public. “Newspapers and magazines, railroad stations and street cars, bill and sign posting, distributing and mailing” were several of the mediums of “modern advertising” touted by The Publicity Company Agency in 1906. [255](#) This shotgun approach led to a race to secure advertising space and plaster the targets mentioned by The Publicity Company as well as bullrings, theatres and every other conceivable public location with posters,

handbills, and, of course, newspapers. A careful look at Porfirian- and Revolution-era photographs reveals a city whose brick and stone structures appear to have lost a game of “Rocks, Papers, Scissors” to the paper blanket of advertising. [256](#) Property owners placed notices on walls demanding (more likely pleading)

“Se Prohibe Anunciar”—Advertising Prohibited. Just as today, the signs had mixed success.

Ad agents teamed up with advertising innovators to circumvent these limitations.

Some used rooftop billboards to rise above crowded or prohibited walls. Others, such as Vicente Villada Cardoso opted for mobile advertising using the streets as their venues. In 1908 Cardoso patented and formed the “Empresa Explotadora del Anuncio de Movimiento sobre Vehiculos” in partnership with fellow Mexican, Luis Rivas Irúz. The newspaper *La Clase Media* supported their effort and explained how moving ads were better than fixed, how they drew more attention, covered more area, and ensured clients “No longer will you be stopped by ‘Se Prohibe Anunciar.’” [257](#)

255 Mexican Herald, May 6, 1906, 19; Jan. 21, 1906, 12.

256 Views of the Zócalo, for example, are fairly easy to come by in photo collections or in the weekly illustrated magazines published during the Porfiriato. One example is *La Semana Ilustrada*, April 8, 1910 which reveals the tram kiosk in the Plaza (across from the La Opera bar) as covered in advertising, even on the tower housing the public clock.

257 La Clase Media, July 1, 1908, 3.

Still others sought the aid of the government in ensuring them space for sale. The papers of Finance Minister José Yves Limantour reveal him as a significant source of economic patronage although he was undoubtedly not alone in dispensing government privilege. For this reason Agacino and others sought him out. José Gayosso received a billboard concession in 1894, in 1901 Carlos Stephan sought a contract with the post office for the sale of advertising envelopes and letter paper, and by 1904 J. R. Southworth of the Compañía de Anuncios Mexicanos had become the “concessionary for advertising privileges at railroad stations throughout Mexico.” In return, concessionaires such as Agacino and others granted the government free maintenance of public property or free advertising space for government propaganda. [258](#)

The federal government extracted more than just free maintenance and publicity from the advertising sector. It also taxed printed advertisements. One of the most vexing regulations for advertisers was the *Ley de Timbre* or Stamp Law. [259](#) Essentially a sales tax, the law replaced the *alcabalas*—the old internal tariffs—and required all goods sold to carry on them or on the receipt of sale (the *factura*) stamps purchased equivalent to the tax.

Recognizing the revenue potential of advertising the government announced in April of 1893

258 As noted earlier, Agacino promised to maintain the lamp posts on which he advertised. José Gayosso received authorization to place billboards in certain public places on the condition that the federal, district, and municipal governments received free advertising in return (*L’Echo du Mexique*, June 14, 1894, 2). In 1901, Carlos Stephan, as *comisionista-importador*, asked Limantour for a letter of reference to the Head Postmaster with the intent of acquiring a contract for advertising envelopes, a hot idea in the patent-application field that placed messages on the back, interior, and inside flap of envelopes (Stephan to JYL, Mexico City, Feb. 24, 1901, CDLIV1901, Roll 9, Carp. 14, JYL-CONDUMEX. For early examples of the advertising envelopes, see Caja 45, Exp. 1775, 19th

Century, Jan. 30, 1890 (sistema de anuncios comerciales en los sobres de cartas) and Caja 39, Exp. 1614, 19th Century, Feb. 2, 1889 (sobre anunciador inviolable), Patentes y Marcas (Gris), Grupo Documental 218, AGN). In 1904 the Compañía de Anuncios Mexicanos, S.A. received a concession for advertising privileges at rail stations throughout Mexico (Southworth to JYL, Mexico City, March 1904, CDLIV 1904, Roll 28, Carp.20, JYL-CONDUMEX).

259 An outstanding treatment of this tax specifically and Porfirian finances and state building more generally resides in Javier Pérez Siller, “Fiscalité, Economie et Pouvoir au Mexique (1867-1911) : instauration, consolidation et chute d’un regime, vol. 1,” Ph.D. diss. (Paris : Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, Nov.

1994), esp. 323-423.

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that the tax would apply to any ads published in newspapers or displayed in “cafes, stores, trams, etc.” and were subject to a fee ranging from two to fifty centavos. Newspapers railed against the tax, as did the National Chamber of Commerce which declared that “publicity had become a necessity of modern commerce, and the imposition of a tax hinders commercial relations. It should be added that the tax is equally unjust to advertisers big and small. . .” [260](#)

The government did not back down, and with the threat of considerable fines for noncompliance space brokers had to ensure that they attached appropriate values of stamps to their clients advertisements.

Advertising Patent Applications

Besides concessions, the government gave advertisers an edge in catching the public's eye through the monopoly of intellectual property rights. ²⁶¹ Advertising patent applications provide a rich source for uncovering the variety of Porfirian-era marketing techniques. ²⁶² In addition, the language used to justify these innovations reveals not just a nascent modern advertising discourse but also a larger discourse of consumption. In each application the common image of the advertising behemoth breaks down into its most basic components: the individual and his thoughts. A refreshing faith and sincerity exists in their explanations of why their products will captivate potential consumers. An unquestioning belief in technology and scientific rationality as the silver bullet in advertising counterbalances the charming bemusement and sociability of a copywriter like Tablada in his 260 *L'Echo du Mexique*, May 23, 1893, 1.

²⁶¹ Edward Beatty, ““The Guarantee of Our Laws:” Patent Law Reform in Nineteenth Century Mexico,” chap. 4

in *Institutions and Investment: The Political Basis of Industrialization in Mexico Before 1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

²⁶² The source for this is located in Gallery 5 at the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City. Applications are filed under the category of “Patentes y Marcas (Gris)”, Documental 218. My selective collection photocopied from this archive runs to over 300 applications.

relationship with a client. This incongruity exists in part because a universal narrative of advertising techniques, effectiveness, and self-definition remained to be standardized by its practitioners although the notion of advertising as a science was gaining ground. The makers of the message had yet to act as the producers of goods already had: to consolidate (into full-service or “vertically-integrated” agencies) and to craft a trade image.

Still, the applications reveal a converging narrative on the rationality and efficacy of the “Science of Advertising.” This language, partly a strategy to gain acceptance from a government office (*Fomento*) that believers in the utilitarian and technological rationality of Porfirian Progress likely staffed, must also have reflected the beliefs of many applicants. For all this sense of riding the cutting edge of modernity a survey of the applications and attached illustrations gives the reader a sense of *déjà vu*, that new technological capabilities and a new language for a new time offered only cosmetic alterations to fundamental cultural forms in advertising. As a general rule these inventors agreed on the need to entice the consumer, to catch the eye. Novelty best achieved this aim in the form of advertising mediums that adopted new technologies that would attract, amaze, and eventually win over the consumer.

They banked on newness and the consumer’s receptivity towards progress and spectacle.

Mixing one part *Popular Psychology* with one part *Popular Mechanics*, applicants argued that they had concocted a winning method of using advertising to not only attract consumers but also to transfer meaning (in this case, i. e. modernity, progress) to whatever products advertisers were trying to sell. Made tangible, this way of seeing the world led to the production of inventions such as Domingo Arámburu’s mechanical dog which he designed to walk the city streets, play music, and dispense ads from its mouth. [263](#) The medium was a 263 Legajo 207, exp. 1, pat. 3273, Oct. 20, 1903 (Un animal anunciador), Patentes y Marcas (Gris), Grupo Documental 218, AGN (hereafter cited as PyM-AGN).

technological *tour-de-force* (if it worked) but the salesmanship principles behind it were less revolutionary: to attract the customer with music, novelty, and the elements of the carnivalesque. To paraphrase, this was new wine in old bottles.

The applicants came from a number of backgrounds. Many were Mexican citizens, most living in the capital but a few resided in other cities of the Republic. [264](#) A large percentage—perhaps even a majority—were foreign nationals mostly of North American or European citizenship although a smattering of Guatemalans and Venezuelans also registered.

The bulk of these did live in Mexico and most applied on their own, while those living abroad used the services of an agent to shepherd their application through the process. The most common agencies were those of Julio Grandjean and Ignacio Sepúlveda although in one case a Mexican Army General provided this service. [265](#) Patent applicants were generally individuals. Pharmacists, [266](#) commission agents, [267](#) store owners, [268](#) store clerks, industrialists, and even an employee for the War and Navy Secretary [269](#) were a few of the occupations listed. Companies applied for patents on occasion near the end of the regime.

The home and office equipment leader Mosler, Bowen and Cook made at least one application while cigarette giant El Buen Tono also received patents under its corporate name. [270](#) Successful patents could receive provisional (patent-pending) or definite approval.

The Development Ministry (Fomento) typically granted a 10 year patent. New patents [264](#) Examples include: Saltillo, Legajo 209, exp. 36, pat. 10,338, April 4, 1910; Puebla, Legajo 207, exp. 14, pat.

6918, May 31, 1907; and Morelos, Legajo 207, exp. 19, pat. 8175, July 6, 1908, PyM-AGN.

[265](#) Examples include: Legajo 209, exp. 11, pat. 7318, Sept. 25, 1907 (Grandjean); Legajo 209, exp. 6, pat. 4946, Sept. 28, 1905 (Sepúlveda);

Legajo 207, exp. 28, pat. 8791, Jan. 23, 1909 (General C.H.M. y Agramonte), PyM-AGN.

266 Legajo 197, exp. 49, pat. 6168, Oct. 11, 1906, PyM-AGN.

267 Legajo 207, exp.7, pat. 4070, Oct. 20, 1904; Legajo 206, exp. 151, pat. 4442, Nov. 26, 1912, PyM-AGN.

268 Legajo 203, exp. 51, pat. 12,328, Nov. 8, 1911, PyM-AGN.

269 Legajo 198, exp. 49, pat. 9407, July 20, 1909, PyM-AGN.

270 Legajo 207, exp.3, pat. 3546, Feb. 27, 1904 (Mosler, Bowen & Cook); Legajo 140, exp. 27, no pat. number, Nov. 14, 1910 (El Buen Tono), PyM-AGN

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received public announcement in its newsletter as well as in newspapers such as *L'Echo du Mexique*, *La Semana Mercantil*, and *El Economista Mexicano*.

Five broad categories of marketing patent ideas characterize submissions to Fomento.

The first two are improvements to interior retail space such as hanging display counters so that customers could better see the products²⁷¹ and improvements in exterior store signs. The third is customer promotion gifts with company labels such as soaps, calendars, and postcards. Vending machines comprise a fourth category, selling everything from nuts to theatre glasses and shaped from the mundane box to a bird which would dip for cigarettes in exchange for centavos. ²⁷² A final grouping is for general advertising systems seeking to better attract the attention of the consumer in public spaces.

Applicants touted the powerful economic and psychological influence of advertising as they positioned their trade as an essential component in the modernization of Mexico.

Xochimilco resident Pedro F. Martínez stated that “Advertising is the powerful lever that elevates and moves the arts, agriculture, industry and commerce” as he successfully patented the use of cigarette and match boxes as advertising space. [273](#) The object of patented marketing innovations was “to facilitate for industrialists of this country a new medium to advertise their goods,” added fellow *chilangos* Pedro Miliner and César Morán nearly twenty years later. [274](#)

271 See, for example, the hanging glass counters of German businessman and Mexico City resident Fedor Lantendorffer, Legajo 203, exp.51, pat. 12,328, Nov. 8, 1911, PyM-AGN.

272 Vending machines were a popular item to patent. Like patent applications in general, these gave insights into the daily issues facing city residents namely falsified money which certain devices promised to catch (Legajo 210, exp. 5, pat. 5654, May 3, 1906; Legajo 210, exp. 1, pat. 5666, July 19, 1904, PyM-AGN). The names given to these devices also reflected the spirit of the age: one bubble gum dispenser look-a-like called itself “Expendedor Automatico SIGLO XX” (Legajo 210, exp. 4, pat. 5486, April 3, 1906, PyM-AGN). An example of a machine vending theatre glasses is Legajo 210, exp. 12, pat.7635, Jan. 2, 1908. For the dipping bird, Legajo 140, exp. 22, pat. ?, Jan. 10, 1910, PyM-AGN.

273 Caja 39, exp. 1617, 19th Century, Feb. 4, 1889, PyM-AGN.

274 Legajo 209, exp. 10, pat. 6583, Feb. 15, 1907, PyM-AGN.

Two basic advertising philosophies dominated. The first can be described as saturation marketing, a technique favoured by space-brokers in which all space is potential advertising space. Spanish citizen and Mexico City resident José Sánchez Hernández expressed this position while pitching his “Hygienic Advertising Packing Crate”: No doubt there already exist a great number of crates destined for packing and that all contain greater or lesser numbers of spaces for advertisements, but we ignore that until today there has yet to be granted a patent for any advertising crate. . . that can hold 21 advertisements. [275](#)

Juan Begovich of Popotla explained the second philosophy of modern advertising: targeted marketing. His proposed “Anunciador Standard” consisted of a clock resting atop a long horizontal glass case. The case would be illuminated at night, backlighting a roll of advertisements that would pass across the front of the glass pulled by an electrical motor. As each ad entered the full field of vision it would stop for a set period of time before moving on to the next. Upon stopping, a poster of the company advertised in the glass would pop up next to the clock and products of that company (“attractive and desirable gifts, souvenirs, price lists, etc.”) would dispense from one of the 34 slots below the case, one slot for each advertiser. This Pavlovian conditioning represents an insight into the influence of Freud and psychology upon the early twentieth-century advertising world. As Begovich explained, The combination of operations produces an effect similar to the public cinema exhibitions sponsored by large businesses [referring to cigarette company El Buen Tono and the brewery Cuauhtémoc among others] in which the passer-by is halted by a screen showing at that moment; he stops, interested in seeing what will happen next, and involuntarily fixes in his memory the name of the business producing the spectacle. [276](#)

This element of the spectacle was essential for cutting through the clutter of advertising messages already circulating in urban society. As an applicant for “Improvements in Advertising Apparatuses” makes clear:

Considering the multitude of advertisements, notice boards for posters and handbills, signs in windows that change and disappear automatically, apparatuses constantly or intermittently illuminated, all used now in or above display windows, on the walls of stores, in vacant lots, in effect—to be brief—in whatever location where they are in a position to be observed by the public, the effectiveness of such publicity methods depends on some original and noteworthy novelty in its construction. Something must be unique and fantastic in its design that attracts—even if for no more than a moment—the attention of passersby. [277](#)

In this strategy technology and engineering skills would provide modern vehicles for traditional ad forms.

Patent applications help to reconstruct how advertising assisted in defining the visual reality of Mexico City with both print and spectacle. Sites of commercialized leisure became obvious locations for marketers. Bullrings not only provided advertising space around the walls [278](#) but served as incubators of celebrity matadors who endorsed products [279](#) and sites for promotions by large businesses. For this reason people like Felipe Buenrostro viewed bullfights as one public location which could use his advertising system with prizes. Tickets would come with a number for which the holder could win a prize if his matched those numbers drawn by

a lottery held after the event. He also adapted this for use by cigarette and railroad companies, claiming it would increase sales by interesting the “public consumer

[*público consumidor*]” with its cash prize. [280](#) Fellow Mexican E. Ureta joined a trend of combining clocks with advertising, using the clock to regulate the viewing duration of each 277 Legajo 207, exp. 28, pat. 8791 Jan. 23, 1909, PyM-AGN.

278 *El Imparcial*, Dec. 17, 1899, 1 described the new Plaza de Toros “Mexico” and its attention to advertising space: “In the upper part of the plaza they have constructed several large overhangs (*copetes*), or so we have heard, that are not very artistic but they will serve as space for advertising posters. What an innovation.”

279 See Bombita and El Buen Tono, *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Dec. 24, 1905, 6 and as noted in Chapter One.

280 Legajo 206, exp. 6, pat. 4074, Oct. 18, 1904, PyM-AGN.

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illuminated ad appearing in a frame beneath it. He envisioned its use at bullrings, theatres, event halls (*salones de espectaculos*), street corners, and anywhere the public gathered. [281](#)

Player pianos, a new phenomenon, became advertising tools as they entertained in cantinas and other locations. In one case, an attachment to the piano’s mechanism advanced a 100

foot long roll of advertisements across the top of the piano between two posts, the whole cycle taking over an hour to complete. [282](#) Billiard halls became potential advertising spaces, not just on their walls but also on the tables themselves. The Mexican Franco brothers applied to patent their

billiard game entitled “Títulos de Marcas de Efectos Nacionales y Extranjeros” in which each ball would be painted with a brand or business name and image. [283](#) Theatre curtains, already hung with fixed ads, now improved with the help of technology. [284](#) Juan Maqueda Aguilar, a Spaniard residing in the capital, was one of two successful applicants in 1907 for a moving advertising curtain in theaters. He called his

“Telón anunciador sin fin” which, like the player piano and the Anunciador Standard described above, consisted of moving new ads across the curtain in an endless cycle. He extolled what he viewed as the obvious superiority of moving ads, that they “more easily caught the attention of the public.” [285](#) Even the barbershop deserved attention. Domingo Arámburu—the maker of the walking, talking, ad dispensing dog—proposed personal ad viewing for each customer in the *barbería*. A roll of paper ads skewered by a rod would hang from the ceiling above each chair. A second rod near the chair would collect the roll as the seated viewer turned a crank “at his leisure” which then turned the roll. Some may call [281 Legajo 209, exp. 34, pat. 9851, Nov. 19, 1909, PyM-AGN.](#)

[282 Legajo 209, exp. 10, pat. 6583, Feb. 15, 1907, PyM-AGN.](#)

[283 Legajo 200, exp. 31, pat. 6504, Jan. 22, 1907, PyM-AGN.](#)

[284](#) See an example of such a curtain in *México, ¿quieres tomarte una foto conmigo?: Cien años de consumo en México* (Mexico City: PROFECO/Editorial Gustavo Casasola, 1996) 31.

[285 Legajo 207, exp. 20, pat. 8180, July 7, 1908, PyM-AGN.](#)

this a captive audience, but Arámburu saw it as a pleasant diversion, noting in his conclusion

“the usefulness that this great distraction provides [the customer].” [286](#)

Out in the streets the marketers tried to make daily—and nightly—life a spectacle.

They provided public diversions that tapped into the contemporary spirit of progress with which humanity conquered the limitations of flight, night, and non-mechanized transportation. This control over nature seems entirely modern. Nevertheless, its impact engenders a response far more traditional; it evokes the thrill of the carnivalesque as the natural order of things appears turned upside down. Light at night, life captured on film, and inanimate objects seemingly brought to life were just some of feats accomplished by the technologies of the late nineteenth century.

Flying objects were popular although their presence in Mexico dates back to the early nineteenth century if not the Enlightenment. [287](#) They typically came in the form of kites, comets or hot-air balloons with ads dangling from them. Inventors also proposed the use of spotlights to extend the medium’s message and appeal into the night. [288](#) More elaborate was the airplane on guide wires patented by the Venezuelan Dr. Ignacio Lares Ruíz. In his plan a series of poles with arms branching from the top would suspend two parallel cables. On these cables four wheels rested, much like a tramcar, and these supported a wooden airplane six feet long and four feet wide covered with ads and possibly dangling an advertising sign.

A gasoline engine or electric current would move the airplane, and the doctor suggested [286](#) Legajo 206, exp. 2, pat. 3297, Oct. 31, 1903, PyM-AGN.

[287](#) Gary Kuhn, “Fiestas and Fiascoes—Balloon Flights in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” *Journal of Sports History* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 111-118.

[288](#) Legajo 209, exp. 19, pat. 8670, Dec. 16, 1908 (Anuncios Aereos); Legajo 207, exp. 3, Pat. 3546, Feb. 27, 1904, PyM-AGN.

adding a male or female dummy at the front of the plane “to better produce the illusion of a real airplane.” [289](#)

Another favourite application idea was to construct a larger-than-life model of the product to be advertised. One idea was for business houses to shape their delivery vehicles, whether drawn by horse or combustion engine, in the image of their product. These included

“books, cigarette and cigar boxes, medicine bottles, instruments, tins, and bottles.” [290](#)

Concepts for constructing products such as cigarettes, shoes, bottles, and other objects out of cardboard, papier-mâché, and aluminum commonly crossed the desk at the patent office. [291](#)

A fancier version included a hollow product attached to a wheeled platform and large enough to fit a person. This enabled an employee hidden inside to push his way along the central thoroughfares of the city and gain the public’s attention. The object could also be pulled by horse or engine if desired. [292](#) The most impressive was that of a Spaniard, Napoleón Valero Martin, who in 1905 received a patent for an advertising system consisting of a human dummy containing a phonograph. [293](#) With the push of a button or pull of a ring the dummy would provide information about the advertising business. Valero Martin, restating the need to cut through the clutter, declared his system worked “with the object of sparing the public the bother of fixing its attention on the signs, cards, sheets and posters that are used today.”

He added that his system would have a sizeable public relations benefit for the advertiser since customers would actively seek it out: “The advantages

of my advertising system are incontestable, since for curiosity and distraction the public will hear without being bothered the most complete details of the goodness and value of the advertised products.”

289 Legajo 207, exp. 51, pat. 11,520, Feb. 20, 1911, PyM-AGN.

290 Legajo 207, exp. 55, pat. 11,668, Apr. 7, 1911, PyM-AGN.

291 Legajo 206, exp. 7, pat. 4070, Oct. 20, 1904, PyM-AGN.

292 Legajo 207, exp. 9, pat. 6096, Sept. 22, 1906, PyM-AGN.

293 Legajo 209, exp. 6, pat. 4946, Sept. 28, 1905, PyM-AGN.

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Tramcars were considered premium advertising locations. Exterior ads attracted the attention of crowds thronging the streets. Only when parked at the Zócalo did the trams lose the urban observer’s eye which transferred its gaze to the enormous public clock and colour posters for cigarette, beer, and department store companies plastering the central terminal kiosk. [294](#) Newspaper ads for products such as Jules Robin Cognac picked up this urban phenomenon, [295](#) while applicants sought to increase the impact of exterior ads by such means as adding an illuminated three foot high advertising sign running the length of the tramcar. [296](#)

Advertisers prized interior space as well with a captive audience looking for visual stimulation, much as today’s transitgoers find themselves inevitably gazing up at the ads in metro cars. Foreign visitors to the capital remarked with surprise at the amount of advertising within the trams. [297](#) Mexican citizen and Saltillo citizen Eduardo Hay sold his advertising system,

“Anunciador Viajante” by claiming it ideal for trams and trains, hotels, theatres and other public locations. Focusing on trams and trains, he openly admits his reliance on an audience with no place else to go: “An advertisement placed in my system will have the advantage of being continually viewed by the traveller who will be seated together with it, and since travelers generally look for some distraction, no matter what it might be, they will be strongly drawn to pay attention to the advertisement, reading it perhaps more than once, and by so doing satisfying the goal of the business advertising.” [298](#)

294 See, for example, the photograph of the kiosk in *La Semana Ilustrada*, April 8, 1910.

295 *El Imparcial*, Feb. 21, 1906, 6. The ad shows a stationary streetcar filled with passengers waiting on a man with one step on the stairs. The conductor asks him “What’s it going to be, friend, on or off?” He replies

“Don’t hassle me, I’m reading the advertisement for Cognac Robin and I’ve got a right to do so. I guess that’s the reason why they put it there!”

296 Legajo 206, exp. 151, pat. 4442, Nov. 26, 1912, PyM-AGN.

297 For example, Percy Martin, *Mexico of the Twentieth-Century*, vol. 1 (London: Edward Arnold, 1907), 235.

This includes a photograph of a tram car interior filled with ads.

298 Legajo 209, exp. 36, pat. 10,338, Apr. 4, 1910, PyM-AGN.

Applicants even found a way to install the ubiquitous “tela sin fin”—the moving rolls of advertisements—inside the tram. [299](#)

Lighting, particularly electric lighting, transformed city life in amazing ways. [300](#) It assisted in maintaining public order, and combined with the newly formed *gendarmerie* provided a better level of security for the growing number of stores with inventories of value.

It also extended the hours and extent of public life on the streets as well as that of private commercialized leisure such as theatres, circuses, roller skating rinks, and restaurants.

Lighting further aided a culture of consumption by providing stores much better display opportunities and longer hours with a purer, brighter light and cleaner air than kerosene and hydrogen lamps provided.

Advertisers quickly jumped on this marvel as a way to attract public attention. Juan Begovich's Anunciador Standard and an earlier patent for a similar device were both powered and illuminated by electricity. [301](#) Electrically lit store signs were popular, and the Mexican Light and Power Company held contests for the best. [302](#) Patent applicants also used dry cell batteries to make electricity portable, with the result that advertisers could send men lit up with advertising messages out on the street at night. At least three inventors filed patents for an *Hombre Luminoso* in 1907 and 1908. Two received definite status and at least one, filed by Y.D. Arroyo but owned by El Buen Tono, appeared in the streets in a much-299 Legajo 207, exp. 8, pat. 6005, Aug. 18, 1906, PyM-AGN.

300 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Trans. Angela Davies, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), especially Chapters Two ("The Street") and Three ("Night Life").

301 The earlier version of the Anunciador Standard is Legajo 207, exp. 27, pat.8733, Jan.5, 1909, PyM-AGN.

Both inventions were likely used in practice give the support of the application by the Buen Tono cigarette company and one of the largest drugstores in the city, J. Labadie.

302 See *El Imparcial*, Oct. 23, 1904, 3 for a sample.

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publicized advertising campaign. [303](#) A related yet less compelling and probably less successful idea was the creation of an “Advertising Cape” by the team of Víctor Manuel Toro (Mexican) and Lucilo Gutiérrez (Spanish). [304](#) Advertisements lined the inside of the garment while the male or female wearer held a wooden rod that connected to the top edge of the cape, thus allowing the width of the cape to be extended and the advertising space enhanced when the operator flung open his cloak.

Cinematography and its ancestors—the kinetoscope and the magic lantern—served the dual purpose of breaking up the darkness of night and capturing life on screen. The magic lantern was a night-time entertaining standard for the last quarter century in events ranging from sophisticated expatriate celebrations to more plebeian gatherings. [305](#) It consisted essentially of backlighting a still object or image through a lens onto a screen or other surface. In 1889 Mexican citizen Enrique Angulo applied to transform the Magic Lantern into an advertising medium, claiming to be able to project a three inch diameter glass photographic image onto a 25 foot wide screen. He noted this screen could be a wall, or a cloth attached to a roof or a carriage. He noted that “As these ads will be shown at night they will without any doubt call the attention of passersby and will be more effective than any other system.” [306](#)

Later patent applicants stressed portability to follow the crowds. They mounted similar devices or movie projectors onto the back of horse-drawn or motorized delivery [303](#) See Chapter One for the full story on Electric Man and his use in tobacco advertising. His patent is Legajo 209, exp. 17, pat. 7894, April 9, 1908. The other definite patent is Legajo 207, exp. 25, pat. 8423, Sept. 30, 1908 (Un aparato para anunciar ambulantes); the third patent application is Legajo 209, exp. 11, pat. 7318, Sept.

25, 1907, PyM-AGN.

304 Legajo 207, exp. 47, pat. 11211, Nov. 18, 1910, PyM-AGN.

305 For examples of licenses received for Magic Lantern commercial ventures, see J. Martínez Castaño to Ayuntamiento, Feb. 23, 1902, exp. 1197, *Diversiones Públicas*; and (illegible name) to Ayuntamiento, June 4, 1902, exp. 1171, *Diversiones Públicas*, Archivos de ex-Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, Mexico City (hereafter cited as the AACM). For a description of the Magic Lantern, *Le Mexique*, July 20, 1902, 11.

306 Caja 39, exp. 1609, 19th Century, Jan. 31, 1889, PyM-AGN.

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vehicles. They drew on the popular success of the cinema which reached Mexico in 1896

and lured enthusiastic crowds to the salons and the less-reputable public tents (*jacalones*) which sprang up around the city. El Buen Tono regularly showed free films at four fixed outdoor locations throughout the city, two of which were located in poorer areas to the east and northeast of the Zócalo. For more direct and smaller-scale advertising purposes, most patent applicants combined a phonograph for sound, a cinema or still projector for images, sometimes strands of coloured light bulbs and electric bells to attract attention, and always an electric motor to run both visual and aural devices. [307](#) The portability of these devices allowed them to cover a wide area of the city. The *poblano* Agustín Vélez intended his vehicle, modestly named “Vélefono,” to be “installed at train stations or run through the principal streets, public plazas, avenues” and other public locations with the goal of

“showing, to the passersby, one ad after the other.” [308](#)

Perhaps one of the most spectacular and grandiose marketing ideas belonged to Emilio Cortés, a Mexican national working as a clerk in the Capital. In 1903 he successfully applied for a patent on his “Lighthouse for fixed and moveable advertisements that alternate and illuminate as they change.” Shaped like a slender, four-sided pyramid, the tower could be modified in height from 25 to 200 metres tall, although for his model he chose 100. The base advertising panels each measured four-by-four metres while those at the pinnacle only one metre per side. The tower consisted of 33 sections, the bottom 28 reserved for fixed advertisements. Cortés left enough space for wind flow and even included a feature by which the ads could be rolled up “when there are hurricanes.” Levels 29 and 30 were left blank to emphasize the next two levels on which cinema projectors backlit changing 307 Examples include Legajo 207, exp. 5, pat. 5284, Jan. 25, 1906; Legajo 207, exp. 15, Pat. 7080, July 19, 1907, PyM-AGN.

308 Legajo 207, exp. 14, pat. 6918, May 31, 1907, PyM-AGN.

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advertisements. He does not explain how the projector would be changed. The last level, 33, reserved its four sides for the portraits of Díaz, Juárez, Hidalgo, and Colón. From the top sprouted a crown of advertising flags, dominated by one Mexican flag “on which there will be no advertisements.” [309](#) Cortés clearly represented the Porfirian spirit of progress, conceiving of a structure in excess of 300 feet that would rule the skyline of the capital, elevating advertising and civic patriotism above all else.

These splashier public spectacles should not overshadow the cornucopia of little surprises that businesses used to regale customers and whet their

acquisitive appetites. From an anthropological perspective this extended the bonding function of gift exchange from the social to the commercial. ³¹⁰ By privileging the cultural and social over the economic significance of interactions between retailer and consumer one again sees how consumerism embedded itself within a larger body of social practices that remain quite consistent across human societies. Marketing innovators intuitively following this behavioural logic as they advanced ideas such as glycerin soaps encasing product logos and images³¹¹ or a plethora of dispensers such as Begovich's Anunciador Standard and ball-shaped glass advertising machines designed so that shoppers could press a button in return for a collectible trading card on which the store attached assorted premiums or discount coupons. ³¹² Stores could also hand out small pocketbooks such as the "Anunciador Universal Multedo" containing "a series of photoengravings interspersed among advertisements, post cards [the trading of which became something of a fashionable mania during the last half of the Porfiriato], needle 309 Legajo 207, exp. 2, pat. 3289, Oct. 28, 1903, PyM-AGN.

310 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990); James Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (London: Routledge, 1994); Helmuth Berking, *Sociology of Giving* (London: Sage, 1999); and Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978).

311 Legajo 197, exp. 49, pat. 6168, Oct. 11, 1906, PyM-AGN.

312 One example: Legajo 206, exp. 11, pat. 5085, Nov. 18, 1905, PyM-AGN.

cases, in sum, anything that can make advertising propaganda more attractive and therefore increase the clientele of the business advertising.”
[313](#)

Perhaps the most common and widespread form of advertising gifts to customers were collectible trade cards and *calendarios*. Trade cards, or *cromos* (from chromolithography) were small, usually 1.5 x 3 inch cards with a photo or illustration on the front and the advertisers name, address, and sometimes other information on the back. As in the United States and Europe these cards selling everything from chocolate to cigarettes formed a popular culture phenomenon. [314](#) Cigarette companies were probably the biggest distributors of cards, issuing lengthy series of cards ranging from the educational to the pornographic. Newspapers reflecting a gente decente sensibility railed against these images.

They raised the spectre of moral corruption as any upright father of a gente decente family might “like all good Mexicans” light up at the dinner table and “surrounded by his offspring go and inadvertently exhibit the unexhibitable.” [315](#) Although tobacco companies reigned in some of the most piquant imagery, ongoing public debate suggests that businesses refused to completely renounce such a successful marketing premium.

Calendarios were all the rage in the late Porfiriato, again demonstrating the value of gift exchange and the impact of cheap, coloured photoreproductive technology. Every big business in Mexico City handed out these calendars at Christmas time as gifts to their customers. Department stores, tobacco companies, pharmacies, product agencies and others all vied to produce the most popular calendar. They sent copies to the newspapers that then [313](#) Legajo 206, exp. 137, pat. 4206, Nov. 28, 1908, PyM-AGN.

[314](#) For European and American trade card information see Robert Jay, *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987); and Peter Marzio, *The Democratic Art: Chromolithography, 1840-1900: Pictures for a Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1979).

The author of this dissertation acquired a collection of these cards, mostly those from tobacco companies, from flea markets in Mexico City and

Puebla.

315 *El Imparcial*, April 30, 1899, 1, “Cigarros y desnudeces.”

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announced their arrival and rated them. [316](#) Family members combed the shops of the city in an effort to collect the most and best calendars. [317](#) Afterwards they would arrange their treasures on the living room wall.

Many successful patents saw the light of day in actual practice; many others did not.

While historians can match several of those found in the archives with marketing campaigns covered in the newspapers a definitive study would be impossible. Most importantly, these applications represent admission into a way of thinking about society, commerce, and consumer behaviour that was incontrovertibly entrenched by the last half of the Porfiriato if not considerably before. They provide another vision, no matter how incomplete, of a spectacularized and commodified urban life constantly refreshed by marketing and retail innovations created by individuals who never applied for patent status. Attaching names and histories to even this small segment of the population involved in Porfirian marketing serves to decentralize our image of this field of cultural production and emphasize the way in which the uncoordinated daily actions of urban citizens, taken in their aggregate, shaped the meaning of the city in which they live.

Printed Media: Lithography

This chapter has tried to emphasize the cultural continuity of advertising forms. In no way does this imply a constancy in the technologies and techniques that deliver those forms.

Perhaps the defining feature separating the Porfirian advertising from preceding periods was the explosion of printed media made possible by cheaper paper and new printing ³¹⁶ Examples include department stores Palacio de Hierro, Puerto de Tampico, and the paper store Helvetia in *L'Echo du Mexique*, Jan. 20, 1905, 2; Cognac Louis Royer and Champagne George Pageard in *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 21, 1904, 2; grocery store La Fama Italiana in *El Imparcial*, Dec. 18, 1897, 3.

³¹⁷ *El Imparcial*, Jan. 10, 1901, 1.

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technologies. No treatment of consumerism in Mexico can avoid the signal role of the printing press in advancing the cultural importance of advertising.

It might be assumed that newspapers were the dominant medium of advertising in this Porfirian consumer culture yet newspapers were not the only products of printing presses that shaped the visual universe of Porfirian urban life. The preceding sections on advertising agencies and patent applications touched on the colourful and entertaining ephemera of public advertisements that ornamented the urban landscape and were by far the most accessible and commonly viewed printed medium. Unfortunately the very transitory, decentralized nature and ubiquity of this popular culture detritus ensured that it would not be kept, catalogued, and incorporated into the official archive repositories to anywhere near the same degree as has been done with newspapers and books. In this forgotten if not “hidden transcript” ³¹⁸ discarded product packages joined handbills passed out in the streets and railway stations, posters plastered on street posts and buildings for the latest show or cigarette brands, advertisements arranged

overhead of patrons in street cars and even barbershops, and cardboard placards that graced the walls of pulquerías and cantinas in an effort to promote bottled beer and machine-rolled cigarettes.

318 The term “hidden transcript” comes from James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Scott uses the term to describe the dynamics of power relations between rulers and the ruled. The concept of hidden and official transcripts offers an alternative to models of hegemony and false consciousness as an explanation for the absence of dramatic and lasting social revolutions. He discusses the absence of (or difficulty in finding) this hidden transcript in official archives (87) and encourages scholars to plump the rich depths of popular culture voices found in songs, folktales, jokes and other sources. I would include advertising, especially in these years, because frequently folk artists such as José Guadalupe Posada and Juan B. Urrutia created visual and written texts which tapped into the popular desires and concerns of their clientele.

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What separated these forms from the newspapers was the vibrancy of colour. [319](#) The mid-nineteenth century technology of chromolithography made it possible with its layering of colours and ability to make thousands of reproductions from the same set of lithographic stones. [320](#) Cheaply produced and widely distributed these advertisements provided visual richness and excitement to a potentially drab urban landscape of stone buildings and muddy streets. Advertisers used colour whenever possible in their advertising for the simple reason that consumers clamoured for it once the technology of chromolithography made it not only possible but also affordable. [321](#) The rising tide of imported goods compelled their agents and retailers to import their advertisements from the parent company, often times still in the original language or else translated with mixed

effectiveness. This practice was not new to the Porfiriato. By 1871 ships were already including rolls of advertisements as part of their cargo. [322](#)

Yet the tendency to focus on imported goods during the Porfiriato overlooks the considerable domestic lithographic industry. Some companies, such as the Buen Tono cigarette company, supplemented and then entirely replaced imports with their own lithographic departments. Buen Tono relentlessly upgraded its much-touted lithographic 319 Exceptions did exist.

Newspapers occasionally published on coloured paper. More dramatic was the use of colour on a black and white background by the flagship paper of Rafael Reyes Spindola, *El Imparcial*. For example, the ad for the heavily advertised Vino de San German, featuring a well-dressed man holding a bright red box of the medicine over his head, *El Imparcial*, May 17, 1903, 4. See also the full-page ad for the Orrin Circus featuring the famous clown, Ricardo Bell, that includes not only red but blue, yellow, and green, in *El Imparcial*, Mar. 8, 1903, 12.

320 Marilyn Maness Mehaffy, “Advertising Race/Raceing Advertising: The Feminine Consumer(-Nation), 1876-1900,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 23, no. 1 (1997), 84.

321 The craze for colour exceed national borders and included nearly all visual media. A reminder of this scope may be found in Richard Abel’s *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) in which Abel resurrects the colour movies that preceded the age of Technicolor. By 1902 the French led the way with the hand-application of layered colour using a stencil process. The widespread acclaim and demand for these films followed the popularity already attained for colour print advertising provided by chromolithography. Abel quotes a New York lithographer who wrote in 1894 that “People in these days seem to have gone picture-crazy. There never has been such a demand as there is now. They do not care so much for black-and-white as they used to—they want color.” See pages 40-47.

322 *El Correo de Comercio*, April 5, 1871, 3 (Sección Mercantil).

presses to dazzle visiting and potential customers alike with their latest artistic endeavours. [323](#)

The company was already printing off the packaging of several other cigarette companies throughout the Republic when it tried to convince the federal government to allow them to produce all of the cigarette packets in the country in an effort to ensure that every carton carried the appropriate tax stamps. [324](#)

Buen Tono was only one of many players in an industry predating the Porfiriato.

Unfortunately, a precise calculation of the number of lithographic print shops is difficult because business directories often listed them under a shared heading with printing presses.

Nevertheless, in 1867 they numbered seven in addition to 19 printing presses. Three decades later the combined number reached 87. [325](#) Trying to separate the two may be pointless for often they cooperated in joint ventures. For example, José Guadalupe Posada and Vanegas Arroyo popularized the broadsheet format of the penny press. With each edition printed at Arroyo's shop Posada created the graphic images down the street in his own lithography workshop. [326](#) Posada's work provides evidence that lithography was anything but a reserve of the Porfirian modernizers. His lithographic press produced one of the most enduring icons of Mexican traditional popular culture: the *calaveras* (skeletons). At the same time he created advertising for song collections, cigarette packaging and a variety of other commercial enterprises. [327](#) Like Agacino, Posada viewed his work as a job and a way to [323](#) See Chapter One

324 Pugibet to JYL, Paris, May 23, 1903, CDLIV 1903, Roll 21, Carp. 15, JYL-CONDUMEX.

325 Maillefert, *Directorio*, 286, 289. The later number comes from *Modern Mexico*, Aug. 1897. A different figure, 84, comes from Domenech, *Guía*, 693-694.

326 Patrick Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 7. Frank notes the proximity of the two shops before commenting that, regarding the content of the broadsheets, "separating the contribution of editor and illustrator proves difficult."

327 *Ibid.* , 5-6. For a collection of book and song book covers, see Roberto Berdecio and Stanley Appelbaum, eds., *Posada's Popular Mexican Prints: 273 Cuts by José Guadalupe Posada* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972), 95-115.

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make a living for his family. [328](#) The lithographic presses merged commerce, art, and entertainment for an audience located at nearly every rung of the social ladder.

Printed Media: Newspapers

In order to illuminate the broader world of Porfirian advertising and interpretive sources I have reserved for last a discussion of newspapers. When historians talk about advertising and consumerism in the Porfiriato they almost invariably cite newspapers as their source. [329](#) From the perspective of source availability this is sensible if uncreative. Perhaps there also exists a degree of presentism, assuming the greatest mass entertainment

and marketing medium of the twentieth century occupied the same cultural niche in the nineteenth.

Even Benedict Anderson walks into this trap in his *Imagined Communities* by granting the newspaper with an unchanging social function and cultural significance. He centres the birth of nationalism in the Americas and in the narrative of the early gazettes which the colonial creoles read to learn of the latest in “commercial news. . . colonial political appointments, marriages of the wealthy, and so forth.” This narrative “created an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers, to whom *these* ships, brides, bishops, and prices belonged.” ³³⁰ A problem arises when Anderson then leaps at least 150 years from this small imagined community among colonial elites to the modern mass-328 Frank notes this with regards to Vanegas Arroyo, stating “the guiding principle that Vanegas Arroyo seems to have followed in planning sheets was whatever he thought would sell.” Frank, *Posada’s Broadsheets*, 6.

329 See Pérez-Rayon, “La publicidad en México”; and Smith, “Contentious Voices Amid the Order.”

Exceptions obviously exist, such as William Beezley’s “The Porfirian Smart Set Anticipates Thorstein Veblen in Guadalajara” in William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, eds., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 173-190. Beezley mines local municipal archives as well unusual sources such as the collection of *tarjetas de visita* located at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas (see footnote 14 cited on page 188).

330 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 62.

circulation press and its daily “mass ceremony.” [331](#) He describes the widespread shared experience of newspaper readership without considering how and why the newspaper transformed into a commodity of mass consumption and why it would appeal to a broad spectrum of the public.

The danger of this assumption and reliance on the newspaper is the overprivileging of the media and its message(s) to the exclusion of all other voices. For example, Nora Pérez-Rayón selected a single year, 1900, on which to base her study of Porfirian advertising and, even more disturbingly, relied exclusively on the Reyes Spindola papers *El Imparcial* and *El Mundo Ilustrado* to make sweeping claims about Porfirian advertising and society. [332](#) Phyllis Smith wrote a fine study of Porfirian newspaper advertisements using a much broader range of periodicals but overextended her conclusion that “their [newspaper advertisements]

growth in size and importance attests to the power of the medium itself and its almost single-handed creation of a consumer culture.” [333](#)

What no one seems prepared to admit is that pre-Porfirian and even early Porfirian newspapers were utter failures as true mass-market advertising mediums. To understand better this seeming incongruity a brief review of the history of the newspaper in Mexico and its halting development as a mass-marketing device is in order.

In 1722 the first subscription newspaper appeared with the publication of the *Gaceta de México y Noticias de Nueva España*. Credit for the first newspaper advertisement in the viceroyalty also belongs to the *Gaceta de México* which in 1784 announced its new service for those who might want “to sell slaves, horses or haciendas, lost or found jewelry and other [331](#) *Ibid.*, 35.

[332](#) Pérez-Rayón, “La publicidad en México.”

[333](#) Smith, “Contentious Voices,” 195.

things of this sort.” ³³⁴ This tiny, black and white text message fit the bare minimum criteria of advertising: to make something known, publicly and generally. Over the next ninety years advertising in the press managed to migrate from the last to the first page and small images increasingly complemented text messages. In 1857, *El Eco Nacional* devoted half of its first page to advertising. These ads for a range of clients including clothing stores, bookstores, tobacco manufacturers, patent medicine producers, and candle merchants often included graphics. ³³⁵ Despite these quantitative changes in advertising content the fundamental nature of the newspaper had changed little. Moreover, advertising and general consumer issues remained distinct from—and subordinate to—the rest of the copy.

The image newspaper editors held of the mission and audience of their product combined with economic factors limited the utility of the newspaper as an advertising medium. The essential content had changed little since the age of Anderson’s first creole consumers. News of ship arrivals and the goings-on of the elite still dominated, although some world news and long political essays often filled the pages. Low readership numbers characterized the nineteenth-century newspaper industry regardless of the editor’s political stance. Economic considerations contributed to this state. The paucity and high price of newsprint resulted in a single copy costing 10 centavos or more, far out of reach for labourers earning a daily wage only three or four times that amount. Aside from price, interest and audience determined low circulation. These papers were predominately the upper classes talking to each other. Moreover, the emphasis on politics and “serious” matters likely left many potential readers uninterested at any price. Entertainment, spectacle, and other ³³⁴ Zamora Casillas, “Alacena publicitaria,” 48. Cited in Smith, “Contentious Voices,” 148.

³³⁵ *El Eco Nacional*, Jan. 1, 1857. Half of Page One is devoted to advertising including an illustrated ad for La Veracruzana Tabacos. Page

Four also contains ads. An ad for a clothes store (*cajon de ropa*) called La Industria Francesa provides an example of a single ad covering half of one page, *El Eco Nacional*, June 10, 1857, 1.

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traditional forms of popular marketing techniques were absent from journals maintaining an aura of rationality and gravitas of Enlightenment social leadership. This is not to discount the role and relevance of politics in society. The hard truth, however, is that official politics plays a much smaller role in the public's daily life—even in such tumultuous periods as the Early Republic—than many of us care to admit.

But we often forget that the newspaper as a mass-market advertising medium was not a historical inevitability. Newspapers are themselves commodities: they are produced for the purpose of sale in a market. As such, there was no inherent need to sell space to advertise goods and services. The newspaper served a circumscribed market and provided a valuable political and social function that did not require it to fulfill an historical destiny applied *ex post facto*. It served as a cultural form consonant with its time and place in history.

Nevertheless, the newspaper transformed along with the society in which it functioned. As the impact of the market economy and its accompanying consumer revolution washed over Mexico the newspaper increasingly found itself well-suited to provide meaning to the social changes in progress. But to perform this new cultural role in a market economy the newspaper itself had to change.

The Newspaper's New Role

As in any evolution of a cultural form the change was neither sudden nor smooth.

Evidence of this adaptive process exceeds the simple tracking of increased advertising quantity and quality throughout the nineteenth century.

Numerous dead ends ensued. The newspaper *El Anunciador Mexicano* represents one of these attempts at hitting the right formula in this new age.

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The language, strategy, and aim of this newspaper should give pause to those who give the development of advertising (and consumerism in general) short shrift. *El Anunciador Mexicano: Organo del Comercio e Industria* published its first edition on November 22, 1877. [336](#) It attempted to overhaul both the economic model and cultural function of the newspaper by discarding the notion of the newspaper as a commodity itself and embracing the idea of newspapers as a mass-marketing advertising medium by giving away its copies for free. Its prospectus stated that one should advertise because “it is the axiom of the century that, *he that doesn't advertise, doesn't sell.*” *El Anunciador* charged 5

centavos per line, per edition and promised to publish twice a week with 11,000 copies in each for a total of 88,000 copies freely distributed to willing consumers every week. Of those 11,000, 5,000 would be distributed in the capital, 5,000 in the states of the Republic, and 1000 in Havana, New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, Paris, and London. Within Mexico City 2000 would be delivered to houses, 2000 to the Arbeu, National, Principal and Novedades theatres. [337](#) A final 1000 would be handed out along the Alameda, the Zócalo, and “and other public thoroughfares” with 20 posted in “the most visible points of the City so that they can be read by the people.” It listed 25 cities in the states where the *Anunciador* would be advertised and named the business houses where copies would be posted

and from which they would be distributed. The paper did not last long and some of its distribution claims seemed farfetched. ³³⁸ Still, by this date it recognized a national market, pinpointed the key centers of consumer activity in the Capital, and identified the need for industries and consumers throughout the country to be informed of “the manufactures of the whole country, 336 *El Anunciador Mexicano: Organo del Comercio e Industria*, Nov. 22, 1877, 1.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 25, 1877, 1.

³³⁸ This assumption of its longevity stems from the fact that I could only track down the first six editions of the paper ending in December of 1877.

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the prices of the articles in each locality, the places where they can buy the cheapest, and the good production houses of the Republic.” It had the form but not the wherewithal, and other than the fact that it might have been just a scam the *Anunciador* lacked the technology and capital to make itself a real presence in the newspaper market economy. In addition, while providing plenty of advertisements its content remained traditional and lacked the elements of entertainment and the spectacularization of daily life, those compelling qualities which could confer upon it mass appeal. Newspapers continued to edge towards this realization, but not until 1896 did a newspaper hit the magic formula of content, capital, and technology to transform the newspaper in Mexico into a true object of mass consumption and vehicle of mass-marketing.

In 1896 Rafael Reyes Spindola and Carlos Díaz Dufío launched *El Imparcial* and changed the place of the newspaper in Mexican society. Reyes Spindola revolutionized the newspaper business model in Mexico and made the mass-circulation daily a permanent reality. From a purely economic perspective he removed the cost barrier to a mass-market by driving down the copy price to a single centavo. To attain this low price he

relied on government subsidies, revenues derived from the roughly 50% of the paper's space it reserved for advertising, and by adopting the modern retail model of "sell cheap and sell often" ascendant in Mexico among department stores and the big tobacco companies. By undercutting its competition in search of a mass market *El Imparcial* ground down then eradicated such stalwarts of the traditional press as *El Siglo XIX* and the *Monitor Republicano*. Reyes Spindola offered a product seemingly apolitical yet thoroughly supportive of the regime's modernization program. This pro-development stance was most overwhelmingly conveyed in the consumer-orientation of the publication, not just in its 130

innovative and conspicuous advertisements but also in its general coverage of businesses, products, fashion, and consumer behaviour. Because of all these characteristics—ties to the government, emphasis on consumption, and "commercialization" of the press—the paper became the *bête noire* of contemporary and future opponents of the Díaz regime who cite it with a mixture of loathing and awe.

A low price helped to achieve unheard-of circulation figures. Daily runs of 70,000 by 1902³³⁹ occasionally peaked at 125,000 during 1907 before settling at a consistent 100,000

by 1910. Reyes Spindola further plumbed the downscale market with *El Popular* which attained daily runs of up to 50,000 and reached the more affluent with the re-launch of the weekly news and photo magazine *El Mundo Ilustrado* in 1900. Editors trumpeted these circulation numbers on the front page. All this in a city and federal district whose populations in 1910 just topped 400,000 and 720,000, respectively. ³⁴⁰.

A low price made a mass market commodity possible; a change in conditions and content made it happen. Historians might consider that—culturally—*El Imparcial* was the right paper at the right time in Mexican history. A confluence of printing technologies, increased consuming capacity, a deluge of goods needing a far-reaching advertising medium, and a rapid growth in the size and population of a city in search of an identity

all created an historical moment in which *El Imparcial* could be launched and thrive.

To understand the success of *El Imparcial* is to answer the questions Anderson left unasked or did not consider. The city is, of course, as much an imagined community as the nation-state. In the metamorphosis of the city under the strains of what Karl Polanyi has 339 Rafael Reyes Spindola to JYL, Mexico City, Dec. 5, 1902, CDLIV 1902, Roll 14, Carp. 13, JYL-CONDUMEX.

340 Moisés González Navarro, *Estadísticas sociales del Porfiriato, 1877-1910* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Estadística, 1956), 7; *Estadísticas históricas de México* (Mexico City: INEGI, 1984), 24.

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called “The Great Transformation” the technological, production and cultural revolutions accompanying the entrenching market economy led to the simultaneous rise of a consumer economy and an urban mass culture. [341](#) Across the Atlantic in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, Vanessa Schwartz implicitly begins from this point as she considers the omissions of Anderson through the lens of the relationship between the press and the visual entertainments that constituted a developing urban mass culture. [342](#) Schwartz agreed with Anderson that the newspaper created a mass community but sought to understand and explain why the newspaper enjoyed such widespread and sustained appeal among individuals. She argued that “the newspaper served as one of the most powerful forms of modern mass cultural urban entertainments in the sense that it constituted a collective and then aimed to please it through a newspaper reading.” [343](#) It is the spectacularization of city life and the narrative provided for it by the pairing of images and stories in the press that made the newspaper a mass commodity and the city an imagined community. Schwartz therefore explicitly associates modernity with the fusion of visual and written texts, a direct contradiction of Anderson who asserted that it is the rise of written and the decline of visual

texts that characterize modernity. ³⁴⁴ For Schwartz, “a culture that became ‘more literate’ also became more visual .

. .” ³⁴⁵ In Mexico, *El Imparcial* led the Porfirian press in adopting this new formula.

341 Karl Polanyi , *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1957).

342 Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

343 *Ibid.*, 27.

344 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, esp. 23-25. Anderson implicitly makes this case when he counterposes the medieval world “in which the figuring of imagined reality was overwhelmingly visual and aural” based on religious icons, art, and oral traditions with the modern world in which the imagining of time as well as self and group identity found structure in “two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper.” More broadly, his concentration on textual narratives and silence on even the increasing visual element of newspapers reinforces this oversight.

345 Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 2.

For Reyes Spindola did not just change the content of newspapers; he also changed how to present the content. He contributed to the “spectacularization of city life” by sensationalizing the everyday in Mexico City and in so doing attracted a mass readership.

Transforming the written text he favoured journalists with an exuberant style and a proclivity for factual embellishment while devoting considerable space to crimes, disasters, and other events deemed likely to horrify, titillate, but most importantly, attract a readership. As he candidly explained early in his career, “A journalist, in my opinion, must exaggerate to touch the imagination of the masses.” ³⁴⁶ *El Imparcial* provided the vehicle by which to put his ideas into practice, delivering to readers four pages of news and advertisements from around the country and the globe as well as a chronicle of their urban world that ranged from the sober to the salacious. To further verify and spectacularize the written texts he inserted illustrations. Reyes Spindola placed a high premium on the visual. He quickly upgraded his presses when halftone photoengraving enabled photographs to be reproduced on cheap paper such as newsprint. In 1903 he imported new rotary presses imported from the United States and specifically noted that he could “illustrate the new paper with finer engravings which I will now have the occasion to do with the new machinery.” ³⁴⁷ Photos served to convey accuracy, authenticity, and “reality” to his stories even more than illustrations.

For this “Yellow Press” style and revolutionary business model Rafael Reyes could be called the William Randolph Hearst of Mexico. But to do so is to fall into the all-too-common trap of privileging a foreign over domestic models of emulation. *El Imparcial* tapped into existing traditional tastes for the sensational, the carnivalesque, and the spectacular. The flavour of the broadsheets produced by Vanegas Arroyo and José ³⁴⁶ Reyes Spindola to JYL, Mexico City, Sept. 22, 1893, CDLIV 1883-1899, Roll 12, Carp. 44, JYL-CONDUMEX.

³⁴⁷ Reyes Spindola to JYL, Mexico City, Dec. 5, 1902, CDLIV 1902, Roll 14, Carp. 13, JYL-CONDUMEX.

Guadalupe Posada captured this tradition and antedated *El Imparcial* for nearly a decade.

Spindola merely repackaged, commercialized (not commodified, since the broadsheets by being for sale were, by definition, commodities), and modernized traditional forms of entertainment. Advertisements mirrored this development, taking advantage of new printing technologies to better incorporate entertaining elements of the spectacle, the huckster, and the half-truth into their testimonial texts and creative images.

To attract a mass audience, *El Imparcial* went beyond the contents of the broadsheets.

It focused on a selective account of urban events and made the often mundane entertaining.

While critics then and now attack *El Imparcial*'s infatuation with the trappings of consumption—whether articles on fashion, urban entertainment, store openings, or other similar and arguably pedestrian topics—they overlook that in these accounts the readership identified their lived reality, or a version of it. The paper featured a host of writers like Juvenal, Figaro, Manuel Gutiérrez Najera and José Juan Tablada who contributed social commentaries on life in the capital. They chronicled the pleasures, travails, and serendipity of modern urban living while creating such famous characters as *El Duque Job*³⁴⁸ along the way. They created a narrative of urban life that made order from disorder and gave meaning and form to the transformation and dislocation that characterized Porfirian Mexico City.

They helped readers anchor themselves in a city straining from ambiguity and chaos generated by rapid physical growth, an endless stream of rural immigrants, and the awe and thrills that science, technology, and business brought to the residents in the way of architecture, urban design, consumer goods and entertainments. Together the commentaries, articles, advertisements and graphic images gave readers a way to see or interpret the city³⁴⁸ This was Gutiérrez Najera's pseudonym and title of one of his most famous poems.

while the simple participation in the daily ritual of newspaper reading promoted the notion that the reader formed part of a larger community whose members shared a common reality.

The Reyes Spindola papers not only integrated written and visual texts within their pages but also helped to generate the spectacles that they covered. Events ranging from bullfights, charity banquets and advertising contests found primary or co-sponsorship from the Reyes Spindola journals as well as other members of the medium. They inserted themselves into the urban narrative they were authoring and used a variety of forms to integrate the press, the narrative, and city life. The release and coverage of the *El Imparcial* annual almanac illustrated this spectacularization of city life. Similar to those provided by department stores such as the *Palacio de Hierro*, this almanac weighed in at 400 pages and contained a calendar, city and national maps, government and business directories, lists of religious and secular events, a compilation of cooking and pharmaceutical recipes, sections on topics such as hygiene and advice, and plenty of advertising throughout the text. A booklet of coupons good for theatre and store discounts accompanied the almanac. The cost was 10 centavos and sale took place outside the newspaper office. *El Imparcial*, its sister publications, and even other newspapers such as the French *Le Courrier du Mexique* built up the day of its release and then published cover stories and photographs of the mixed sombrero and homburg crowd attending the event. [349](#)

The depiction in the photo, staged or not, of an intermingled readership dressed in traditional and Western attire cuts to the core difference between *El Imparcial* and its predecessors. Setting aside his pro-regime editorials, Reyes Spindola actively sought an ecumenical readership by placing the themes Vanegas Arroyo used in his popular 349 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 20, 1901, 3; *El Imparcial*, Feb. 20, 1901, 1; *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Feb. 23, 1901, 1. For the most interesting crowd illustration, see the one on the

front page of *El Imparcial* for the almanac distributed the year before, Feb. 20, 1900, 1.

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broadsheets in the same four pages as the wry social commentaries of Juvenal. *El Imparcial* actually tried to speak to a cross-class readership; previous papers mostly involved the same small class talking to itself. With a price of a single centavo *El Imparcial* put itself within reach of a mass audience, and by discarding the notion of the press as simply a respectable forum for ideas it also provided content and an urban narrative that its readership found compelling. Price, audience, and content distinguished *El Imparcial* from earlier formats.

Social and economic currents combined with technological innovations in print made its existence possible and success assured. In this sense, the market for *El Imparcial* was less created than tapped into.

El Imparcial may have played a leading role in the mass-circulation press but it was not alone. Mexicans of the Porfirian age were voracious readers judging by the number of dailies and weeklies published. National adult literacy rates in the Republic rose from 17%

in 1895 to 29% in 1910 while those in the Federal District rose from 45% to 65% in the same time period. [350](#) The numbers of people who actually derived information from the press was likely even higher given the way newspaper reading occurred at the time. One common tradition was for several people to come together and hear it read aloud. This form had both social and utilitarian aspects as it required only one literate member to relay information, it energized the contents as it converted written texts into lively oral accounts, and finally it allowed participants to transform the individualist act of bourgeois culture into a communal experience. Historian don Luis González confirms the deep historical roots of this tradition [350](#) Mary Kay Vaughan, "Primary Education and Literacy in Nineteenth-

Century Mexico: Research Trends, 1968-1988,” *Latin American Research Review* 25, no. 1 (1990):31-66, especially pp. 42-43. For the federal district rate, consult *Estadísticas históricas de México* (Mexico City: INEGI, 1984), 92.

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in the Prologue to his *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*. [351](#) This practice and the act of passing along newspapers probably laid the foundation of Rafael Reyes Spindola’s assertion that each paper in Mexico changed hands four times during its short life time. [352](#)

The Mexican press adapted to the Spindola juggernaut and seemed to fill every conceivable niche market. Consumers of all economic brackets and cultural predilections could find something that spoke to them. Business, politics for or against don Porfirio, bullfights, cinema, family life, fashion, women’s issues, crime, humour, and numerous other topics were frameworks of cultural life on which publishers were willing to hang a newspaper. Newspapers not only spoke to their interests but also spoke their language.

Every expatriate could find a local publication in their language. Some of the more prominent were the English-language *The Two Republics* followed by the *Mexican Herald* and the French-language *L’Echo du Mexique* and *Le Courrier du Mexique* as well as the monthly *Mexique Moderne*. Prices among this diverse field ranged from a centavo to match *El Imparcial* and continued up to 25 centavos. This does not include the untold numbers of free newspapers that followed the business model of the 1877 *El Anunciador Mexicano*. The mainstream press did not take kindly to this threat and wrote warnings to advertisers to distrust the claims of the free papers. [353](#) Such diversity and conspicuousness of leisure and fashion provides more evidence of a modern consumer lifestyle defining the Capital for many of its residents.

351 Luis González, *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, trans. John Upton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), xxvii.

352 Reyes-Spindola to JYL, Mexico City, Dec. 5, 1902, CDLIV 1902, Roll 14, Carp. 13, JYL-CONDUMEX.

353 *La Semana Mercantil*, Dec. 25, 1893, 616-617.

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In this sense the broader press mirrored *El Imparcial*. An acceptance and reliance upon advertising and a consumer discourse characterized nearly every publication.

Prominent front page solicitations for advertising preceded more elaborate house ads scattered throughout many of the papers. A review of nearly 100 publications confirms an upward trend in advertising space during the Porfiriato that paralleled American newspapers.

Advertising spread throughout the paper, from a ratio of ads to unpaid copy at 70:30 in the 1880s with the bulk of the ads on the last page (usually page four) to nearly 50:50 by the Revolution. Those periodicals falling short of high advertising levels did not fail for a lack of effort. An 1895 front page house ad from one of the first copies of *La Semana en el Hogar* conveys this desire for clients: “ADVERTISERS LOOK AT THIS!!! This newspaper, because of the sections that it contains, is destined to be read by ALL

MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY, in such a way that a notice placed in it has a very high probability of success for the advertiser.” [354](#) Moreover, as the Porfiriato progressed, the vast majority of publications increasingly covered the same kind of consumerist-oriented news that *El Imparcial* had made its

signature. For example, Catholics could count on *El Pais* and *El Tiempo* to deliver the news with a culturally conservative slant yet could find the latest medicine, religious artifacts, and fashions within their pages. With the launch of the weekly *El Tiempo Ilustrado* in 1901 to match Spindola's splashy, photograph-filled *El Mundo Ilustrado*, devout Catholics could now read and see with a clear conscience the latest fashions, behaviour, and consumer trends of the Porfirian bon ton at the Peralvillo track or at the Tivoli Eliseo.

Newspapers became not only mediums for advertising but also educators and advocates of its efficacy. Economic self-interest as well as a genuine belief in the power of 354 *La Semana en el Hogar*, July 23, 1895, 1.

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advertising drove newspapers to make claims of advertising that rang true to many readers.

"Publicity is the lever that moves and fuels the machine called COMMERCE" declared *El Anunciador Mexicano* back in 1877. [355](#) "Publicity in our time is a necessity for the retailer and the industrialist" claimed *Le Courrier du Mexique*, while *El Imparcial* observed that

"Our age, full of curiosities, is seduced by information and by the ADVERTISEMENT; there exists a new art—advertising . . ." [356](#) It added that the best artists were foreign and that

"European journals are full of perfect examples of this careful work." The working class paper *Don Cucufate* counselled the retailers among its readership "He that advertises more sells more, and he that sells more make much more money. This is as obvious as the midday sun." [357](#) The *Mexican Herald*, in one of a series of house ads outlined the logic and necessity of advertising: "You should advertise to create a demand. People need things but usually remain unconscious of the need until some farseeing advertiser

points out such need. People believe they could not get along today without thousands of things their forefathers never dreamed of. Why? Because advertising has created demands and suggested easy means to satisfy them.”

[358](#) In the self-promotion efforts of the Porfirian Press the modern, mass-circulation press alone possessed the skill and expertise not only to bring together producer and consumer in an increasingly mass market but to persuade consumers to satisfy previously unrecognized desires. The cutting edge of modern advertising appeared to have left the quaint world of the *Gaceta de México* in the distant past.

“Separate But Equal”: Four Divergent Visions of a Modern Mexico City 355 *El Anunciador Mexicano*, Nov. 22, 1877, 1.

356 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 16, 1906, 2; *El Imparcial*, Sept. 14, 1899, 1.

357 *Don Cucufate*, Aug. 20, 1906, 4.

358 *Mexican Herald*, May 20, 1906, 21.

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On the surface, then, many members of the Porfirian Press resembled *El Imparcial*.

They had transformed and found a new economic model and cultural function in the social transformation of Mexico City. They all ascribed a narrative to that transformation which advanced a general vision of a modernizing city defined greatly by the material culture of consumerism.

Yet the widespread employment of a discourse of consumption in the imagining and ordering of the city should not be construed as a hegemonic vision. This, unfortunately, is the tendency of many interpretations of the

Porfirian press and advertising which conflate consumption and advertising with gente decente values. A more useful way to think about the cultural role of advertising and the press is to consider how city dwellers shape the city in what American historian Sam Bass Warner has called multiple urban images. He notes that

“these images are found in policies and plans, in fiction and the urban press, in discourse, and in practices.” For Porfirian Mexico City, *El Imparcial* may have sought a “Big Tent”

readership but its vision of the city and the nation consistently reflected the values of the gente decente. It represents merely one of at least four major visions of Mexican modernity to stand out among the press narratives: the gente decente, the Catholic, the hedonist, and the working class.

The gente decente vision found its clearest expression in *El Imparcial*, *El Mundo Ilustrado*, and the expatriate press. These papers expounded a developmentalist ideology that incorporated the values of a protestant capitalist ethic: moral reform, civic pride, time discipline, personal and public hygiene, nationalism, and economic progress. In short, a vision of an ordered, hierarchical society dependent upon state- and self-regulation mobilized for maximum economic efficiency for the progress of the imagined community of the nation 140

and of humanity as a whole. Consumption fit in this system as a way to absorb production, demonstrate materially the benefits of the system, provide visual markers to differentiate social classes in an increasingly fluid and anonymous urban society, and to entice labour to work harder in order to fulfill new material and psychological needs. As a consequence this narrative portrayed an advancing city made for and by the gente decente filled with new urban construction projects, factory openings and exposés, luxury store inaugurations, city entertainments and a host of other evidences of human accomplishment which, save for a few minor setbacks, moved inexorably toward a promising future. Advertising interwove the spectacle

of urban progress with the promise of personal and family betterment through the consumption of a wide variety of products, services, and entertainments.

Even within this luminous vision a shadow of doubt crept. As in the rest of the Western World the bourgeois classes expressed their reservations towards modernity through a discourse of luxury, or what we would call today consumption. This discourse feared that luxury/consumption would result in the decadence and decay of the individual and the nation, a fear that too much civilization softens and depraves. An ambiguity towards modernity crept into its pages and even advertisements. The gente decente recognized that consumption was essential to the growth of the economy as well as visually expressing the benefits of the current social system. This social and economic utilitarian perspective on consumption led to a constant patrolling of consumerist behaviour. Danger presented itself at the top of the social pyramid where excessive consumption and its emasculating effects on the social leadership could lead to a modern-day Rome sacked by those brutish yet virile anti-consumers, the Vandals. Equally perilous, the lower classes must consume their fair share yet not in ways that could threaten the visual ordering of the social hierarchy. To attempt a 141

resolution of this dilemma the gente decente invoked a discourse of “proper” and “improper”

consumption that would provide boundaries for each social class. Thus society could be ordered through consumer behaviour while at the same time advancing national and human evolution.

The second narrative is the Catholic vision. *El País*, *El Tiempo*, *La Semana Católica*, and *El Tiempo Ilustrado* were among its authors. They presented modernization through the lens of cultural conservatism and Catholic vocabulary which instantly excluded them from fitting within the developmentalist rubric. Throughout the 1880s and much of the 1890s *El*

Tiempo possessed moderate but not elaborate advertising. What it did carry involved patent medicines, some simple dry goods store ads, and a wide selection of religious-oriented goods including almanacs, rosaries, candles, and other goods specific to the needs of the religious calendar. Moreover, its copy resisted the drift towards constructing a secular, progressive, and consumerist urban vision.

In general, Catholicism officially denounced fashion and “excessive” consumption.

R.P.V. Marchal encapsulates this position in his reader for Catholic women, *La Mujer Perfecta*. He squarely viewed consumption as a tempter of women, especially “in population centres where industry produces objects of avarice.” ³⁵⁹ Spending too much money, especially by women, lead to broken marriages and marriages delayed. ³⁶⁰ Although this was no longer the War of the Reform, the longstanding Catholic dislike of the Liberals added a domestic political element to the larger theological opposition.

359 R.P.V. Marchal, *La Mujer Perfecta*, trans. S.P. Vicens y Marco (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1908), 167.

360 *Ibid.*, 160-161.

The 1895 Church-State reconciliation with the coronation of the Virgin of Guadalupe neutralized the political dimension of Catholic wariness. ³⁶¹ By 1900 *El Tiempo* had to change. Whether because of direct competition with *El Imparcial* for readership, a change in editorial direction, the need (or potential windfall) of advertising revenue, or a combination of all three, *El Tiempo* increased its advertising and covered more of the same consumer-oriented urban events that *El Imparcial* did. It launched the photograph-

filled news and entertainment weekly *El Tiempo Ilustrado* in 1901 a year after Reyes Spindola successfully inaugurated *El Mundo Ilustrado*. Despite the tirades of their journals, many Catholics adopted the spirit of progress and the modernizing vision of their city. In the process they forced the Catholic press into an unhealthily schizophrenic discourse in which increasing advertising and coverage of consumer issues shared column space with admonitions cautioning against the corrosive effects of consumerist values on religious values. In this sense the Catholics shared a more openly expressed version of the gente decente's ambiguity towards modernity. Nevertheless, the importance of the market for religious goods and the additional filter of ecclesiastical influence and issues in content decisions clearly distinguished the Catholic urban vision from that of the gente decente.

The third narrative is the hedonist vision. The two premier examples of this are *Frivolidades* and *La Risa* with less extreme versions including *Actualidades* and *El Disloque: Revista de Espectáculos*. Their vision of modern Mexico City compelled gente decente parents to hide the children. In the hedonist vision the fruits of modern production and science added to the unchanging pleasures of human existence: good food, good drink, good music, and good sex. Ads for beer, particularly Cerveceria Cuauhtémoc's Carta Blanca, 361 Colin M. MacLachlan and William H. Beezley, *El Gran Pueblo: A History of Greater Mexico* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1994), 164.

figured prominently as the drink for the affluent and urbane. The cachet of sophistication possessed by Carta Blanca was widely established in the Porfiriato, enough so that Federico Gamboa could be sure that his readers would understand when in his novel *Santa* he describes a scene of several men drinking in a cantina among whom the top dog was Feliciano Sordo

“who wore a gold watch and was the only one at the table who drank Carta Blanca from Monterrey.” ³⁶² Restaurants advertised heavily in *La Risa* and *Frivolidades*, as did car dealerships, phonograph retailers, cinema owners, high end clothiers, as did patent-medicine companies and other therapeutic specialists. Not surprisingly many of these latter were to treat venereal diseases. Particularly popular was “Gonosan,” a patent-medicine whose box featured a devil claiming to cure gonorrhea and syphilis. ³⁶³ The sophistication in the presumed tastes of their readership translated into the efforts advertisers put into their messages in these publications. A wide use of photographs and impressive graphic images melded with written texts targeted at this affluent and seemingly sexually voracious crowd.

Evidence suggests that advertisers specifically created ads for each publication, such as the Carta Blanca ad in *La Risa* (*The Laugh*) featuring a laughing man clutching a gigantic beer bottle with the caption “I laugh at imitations!” ³⁶⁴

Through their risqué humour these weekly publications help to gauge the degree to which advertising had become entrenched in Mexican culture. They dwelt on Porfirian gender distinctions while poking fun at moral hypocrisy, using the goods and language of consumerism as backdrops or vehicles to convey humour. With a sharp eye they exposed Porfirian sexuality among the better off. In doing so, they stereotyped women as either dour ³⁶² Federico Gamboa, *Santa* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1979), 171. Gamboa first published *Santa* in 1907.

³⁶³ See, for example, *Frivolidades*, July 24, 1910, 7.

³⁶⁴ *La Risa*, Oct. 1, 1910, 13. This ad or a version of it appears in nearly every subsequent edition for the next year.

wives or pert prostitutes and young ladies in search of easy money. Men were either wistful white-collar employees, dandies, or older generous gents with wads of cash ready to enter the market economy with any commodified young woman. The first example of this satire comes in the form of an advertising contest. Sponsored by newspapers or companies these contests became popular during the late Porfiriato. In its own competition for creative store signs *Frivolidades* awarded prizes for the following tongue-in-cheek responses from readers: in the category of cinemas, “Las delicias de la sombra”; mattress-makers, “El Multiplicador”; bed-makers, “El Sube y Baja”; fashion and accessory stores, “El Martirio de los Casados”; corset shops, “El Tormento Feminino”; and pawnshops, “Los Miserables.” [365](#)

Contributors to *Frivolidades* and *La Risa* offered trenchant if testosterone-laden social commentaries on modern life in the capital and their cartoons particularly zoomed in on the imbalance in social power between the sexes, the parallel commodification of society and the female body, and strategies that a segment of Porfirian women (usually prostitutes) used to maximize their position in this arrangement. In one cartoon entitled “Anuncio económico” (referring to the title of the last page of most newspapers, especially *El Imparcial*, in which small and usually personal ads were placed) an image of a young lady in the latest Parisian attire including enormous peacock-feathered hat stands over the following text: “Virtuous/chaste young lady, authentic virgin, completely unselfish, wishes to contract marriage with a very rich man of whatever age. Note: the marriage can be on the left hand.” [366](#) Meaning, of course, that she is willing to be a mistress. This theme of female prostitution in advertising appears again in another cartoon entitled “In an advertising agency” in which a desk clerk looks wistfully at a fashionably and provocatively dressed [365](#) *Frivolidades*, Mar. 27, 1910, 3.

[366](#) *Frivolidades*, June 26, 1910, 2.

women before his desk. She stands with the toe of her right high-heeled boot on a stool and her elbow resting on her knee as she says “Insert an ad saying that I offer myself as a music teacher and that my specialty is the clarinet.” [367](#) Porfirian probity took a beating in the pages of publications such as *Frivolidades* and *La Risa*.

The hedonistic press reveals an image—and an imagining—of modern Mexico City characteristically overlooked if not outright denied by various chroniclers of the Porfiriato.

For example, Michael Johns in his attempt to find the origins of modern Mexican culture in the Porfiriato goes so far as to declare that the city’s night life shut down by 9 o’clock. [368](#)

His uncritical acceptance of accounts written by foreign travellers (who, given their transience and hosting by respectable families would not have viewed this lifestyle) and reliance on a slender segment of the Porfirian Press leads to such erroneous conclusions. Not surprisingly it has taken works deviating from standard gente decente assumptions of the city to reveal this nocturnal life. One such effort is that of Víctor Manuel Macías-González whose studies of both the aristocracy and the gay community (not necessarily exclusive) have provided new ways to view Porfirian Mexico City. [369](#) In addition, a reading of Porfirian literature also provides a picture of a far more colourful nightlife than Johns allows. [370](#)

Frivolidades, in a cartoon entitled “Twelve Hours in Mexico City: Aspects of Our Life From Six in the Afternoon Until Five in the Morning” provides a timetable of this Porfirian [367](#) *Frivolidades*, June 5, 1910, 5.

[368](#) Michael Johns, *The City of Mexico and the Age of Díaz* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 18. Johns states, “By eight the cafés were full, the streets ablaze with electric light, and the sidewalks jammed with strollers. Within an hour the eateries and cafés began to empty out. Most went home; some went to a show.”

In his eagerness to display the provincialism of the capital he hastily truncates an active nightlife whose early phase he himself vividly describes.

369 Victor M. Macías-González, “The *Lagartijo* at *The High Life*: Masculine Consumption and Homosexuality in Porfirian Mexico,” in *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, eds. Robert McKee Irwin, Edward J. McCaughan, and Michelle Rocio Nasser (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

370 See, for example, José T. de Cuéllar’s humorous short story, *Los Fuereños*, published in the early 1890s, that portrays the tribulations of a provincial family visiting Mexico City and the moral danger and night life encountered by the daughters and the son. José T. Cuéllar, *Baile y Cochino, Ensalada de Pollos, Los Fuereños* (Mexico City: Promexa Editores, 1979).

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nightlife. Set up as a clock, the image replaces numbers with circles in which a picture represents each hour of Mexican life. From 6PM to 8PM the main streets throng with shoppers and people heading home or to their nightly diversions. The next three hours involve bored husbands dining or attending theatre performances with their spouses. From 11PM until 3AM we see the posh billiard halls, the theatres for “hombres solos” (burlesque theatre), the cafés and restaurants frequented by middle-age men with their much younger female companions, and probable brothels represented by dances between older men and young women. The last three hours show a gendarme with his lamp, a gentleman reveller making his way home, and finally business-as-usual as porters and carters carry sacks of goods to represent the start of the business day. [371](#)

This is the kind of consumption feared by the gente decente and the Catholics. The novelty is not so much in the lifestyle but in the material

culture in which it is pursued. For the respectable, luxury and immorality seem intertwined in a downward death spiral for civilized society. Like the *gente decente* and Catholic, the hedonist vision constructs a modern city, but its relationship with consumer goods, the meaning of those goods, and the consumption patterns and behaviours of those who possess this vision completely changes the mainstream definitions of modernity.

Despite their distinctiveness, all three of these cultural visions of Mexican modernity found in the Porfirian Press and advertising—*gente decente*, Catholic, and hedonistic—speak to the white-collar and relatively economically privileged portion of Mexican society. They fit within the usual historical imagination of the profile of Porfirian consumers and consumerism. That profile involves middle- and upper-class Mexicans consuming imported goods. Consider Nora Pérez-Rayon's definition of Mexico's consuming class. She declares 371 *Frivolidades*, March 27, 1910, 3.

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the “middling classes, above all urban” are those in which “publicity found its receivers

[*receptores*] and commercial production, its consumers.” [372](#) Historians overlook the engagement of the lower classes in this consumer culture, considering them neither culturally inclined nor economically capable of consumption beyond the “essentials” of life (beans, corn, chile, pulque, and coarse cotton cloth).

Such self-imposed categorical restrictions seem baffling. Certainly the wealthier strata of Porfirian society had more wealth and disposable income, and they certainly spent more—per capita—than the lower classes. Yet why cut out the 85% or so of the population that did not fit into these

categories and define them as non-consumers? What did they do to eat, drink, court, clothe themselves, entertain themselves, or fulfill religious and social obligations? In other words, without knowing what they consumed and the material culture which they constructed, how does one know how they lived? Clearly, consumption patterns between classes are different. The poor have always spent less on durables (furniture, home decoration, and private transportation) and more on entertainment, food and drink in pulquerías, figones, and other public sites of diversion, often for cultural as well as practical reasons (e.g. if you can't afford a house, let alone a big one, you are not going to furnish it). [373](#) Yet there is an overlap of consumption patterns on numerous items such as mass-produced goods or certain entertainments, such as cigarettes or circus performances. Within these categories there is a considerable price differentiation in which social distinctions can 372 Pérez-Rayon, "La publicidad en México," 196.

373 Leonora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 257.

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be made. As Carole Shammas points out, "Being poor and being a consumer. . . were not mutually exclusive conditions." [374](#)

With this in mind we move to the fourth and final press narrative: the working class vision of a modernizing Mexico. Discussions of the popular press in Mexico typically start and frequently end with the broadsheets produced by the team of Vanegas Arroyo and José Guadalupe Posada. These broadsheets deserve such attention but studies often posit them as guardians of an unchanging, traditional Mexico in contrast to the modernizing press symbolized by *El Imparcial*. Overlooked is the fact that Vanegas Arroyo imported the broadsheet idea and format from France [375](#) although he and Posada undeniably transformed the medium into a vessel

for popular values and concerns over the pace and strategy of modernization implemented by the Díaz regime. The point here is that the lower classes often adopted the material culture of modernity (such as Posada's use of lithography), adapting goods and technologies—often imported—to reflect and express their lived experience. Popular or privileged, social groups in Mexico often adopted new goods and made them their own.

Receiving far less coverage, the working class Penny Press better demonstrates a working class consumer culture and its construction of an urban narrative paralleling those of its more affluent press colleagues. Unlike the broadsheets of Vanegas Arroyo these papers followed the format and business model of *El Imparcial* by relying on advertising (Vanegas Arroyo did not) and providing local and national stories that more directly dealt with the economic, political, and social issues facing labour. Historian María Elena Díaz has 374 Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 1.

375 Patrick Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 10. Frank makes a convincing argument for the similarities between Arroyo's broadsheets and the French *canards* and how the format arrived in Mexico.

analyzed these papers from their political positions and concluded that even the most radical (such as those advocating the strike) still sought to work within the market economy system. [376](#) Surprisingly, no mention is made of the consumer goods and services advertised in these papers and what this implies about the purchasing power, material culture, gender construction, and politics of its readership. Research into working class consumption in the United States provides ways of thinking about these conclusions and

understanding how those Mexicans tied into the cash-based market economy, particularly in urban areas, viewed the possibilities and not just the perils of modernization. Most useful is Lizabeth Cohen's notion of "moral capitalism," the belief that capitalism was not corrupt in itself so long as it operated according to standards of morality and fairness. [377](#) Also instructive is William Leach's study of US department stores in the Progressive era. In it he cautions readers to avoid the dangers of presentism and to study consumer capitalism in its historical context, noting "the opportunities and. . . imaginative culture that arose from early consumer capitalism." [378](#) To deny this element of popular enthusiasm for the possibilities of human progress—even though that capitalism may have failed miserably in living up to its promises—is to miss an important social and cultural crossroads in Mexican and world history.

The University of Texas at Austin possesses the largest collection of the Penny Press.

Their collection includes 13 publications which, as a group, spans from 1900-1911, and 376 María Elena Díaz, "The Satiric Penny Press for Workers in Mexico, 1900-1910: A Case Study in the Politicisation of Popular Culture," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22, no. 3 (October 1990): 497-526.

377 Lizabeth Cohen, "The Class Experience of Mass Consumption: Workers as Consumers in Interwar America," in T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, eds., *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 135-162. See page 138 for an explanation of moral capitalism.

378 William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *Journal of American History* 71, no. 2 (September 1984): 320.

individually from no more than a few issues to nine years. [379](#) The papers published mostly once a week, typically Sunday or Thursday, and charged one centavo for their product. All of these papers published in Mexico City but the penny press also existed in other urban areas. [380](#) To distribute their papers they employed the same techniques as the rest of the press, contracting *vocedores* (street agents) to whom they sold 100 copies for 72 centavos, guaranteeing successful sellers 28 centavos profit for each unit. [381](#) Publication numbers are harder to quantify, although one paper, the progressive *Don Cucufate* claimed runs of 12,500. [382](#) Whatever their actual readership, the papers were popular and powerful enough to raise the ire of Rafael Reyes Spindola, who in 1902 confided in José Yves Limantour that the Penny Press “is tormenting us [referring to *El Imparcial*, etc.] with their foolishness.” [383](#)

Advertisements reinforced these editorial assaults, with the patent medicine “Pildoritas Antibiliosas del Dr. Enrique Hernandez Ortiz” including the barb “That the newspaper *El Imparcial* tells the truth” in its ad titled “Cosas Imposibles.” [384](#)

In the Penny Press the labouring classes found a representation of city life that reflected their lived reality. Front pages paired satirical images with equally biting explanatory *corridos* or *décimas* castigating politicians, factory owners, government regulations, high food prices, competitors in the press, or a number of other subjects.

379 The papers and their available dates are as follows: *El Diablito Rojo*, 1900-1911; *La Guacamaya*, 1902-1910; *Don Cucufate*, 1906; *La Palanca*, 1904-1905; *El Duende*, 1904-1905; *El Chile Piquin*, 1905; *El Chango*, 1904; *El Moquete*, 1904-1905; *La Cagarruta*, 1906; *El Diablito Bromista*, 1903-1909; *El Papagayo*, 1904; *El Pinche*, 1904-1906; *La Tranca*, 1906. Located in the Benson Latin American Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Austin.

380 These papers, as in the Capital, varied in their level of independence. *Heraldo de Morelos: Semanario Político-Mutualista* was one paper that relied on government subsidies and other support in return for a pro-regime stance. A copy can be found attached to the correspondence between José M. Espinosa y Cuevas (honourary president of the Patriotic Committee of Morelos) and José Yves Limantour, CDLIV 1906, Roll 41, Carp. 19, JYL-CONDUMEX.

381 *El Diablito Bromista*, April 26, 1903, 1. The editors printed this information below the title header on every edition.

382 *Don Cucufate*, Sept. 10, 1906, 4.

383 Reyes Spindola to JYL, CDLIV 1902, Roll 14, Carp. 13, JYL-CONDUMEX.

384 *El Moquete*, July 10, 1904, 4.

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Popular nationalism commonly entered through such avenues as corridos for Juárez.

Interestingly, the attacks on capital characteristically took the form of “bread and butter”

issues reminiscent of the trade union AFL in the United States rather than the radicalism of the IWW. These included attacking factories for paying workers with false money or local governments for allowing possible monopolies in meat butchering under the guise of public health. [385](#) Never does the actual economic system come under attack. More surprising, the papers that Maria Elena Díaz characterizes as the most reformist, progressive, and even radical, such as *Don Cucufate*, *El Diablito Rojo*, and *El Diablita Bromista* carried the most advertising. Political opposition to

the regime did not necessarily translate into a dislike of the consumer goods resulting from Mexico's modernization.

The Penny Press, like its more upscale cousins, advertised a wide range of products.

Economic realities did circumscribe the types of products and services as well as the printing technologies used to advertise them. These boundaries nevertheless allowed for the offering of a wide range of goods. Nor did these limitations discourage the papers from soliciting advertisers and touting their power to increase sales by reaching consumers. Even the ad agency Compañía Anunciadora Mexicana used the radical *El Diablito Bromista* to offer its services to the public. ³⁸⁶ They advertised products and services that catered to working class sociability and entertainments in addition to medicines, medical services, clothing, and home furnishings. In each instance they were conscious of price, message, and utility for the target audience.

385 See, for example, "La Fabrica de Metepec" in *La Palanca*, Dec. 18, 1904, 2; and "Todo en contra del pobre: Los comerciantes de carnes en los mercados" in *El Chile Piquín*, Feb. 2, 1905, 1-2. For a much more extensive coverage of this subject see Díaz, "The Satiric Penny Press."

386 *El Diablito Bromista*, May 31, 1903, 4.

Given the squalid state of housing for the poor of Mexico City one understands why working class consumers sought as much companionship

and entertainment in establishments of commercialized leisure. Commonly advertised venues included cafés, *neverias*, and restaurants, including those “served by young ladies” reminiscent of those found in *Frivolidades*. [387](#) More frequent were ads for pulquerías, cantinas, and figones. Like in the United States and elsewhere drinking establishments were sites of working class sociability and bonding. As a result they advertised heavily in the Penny Press. [388](#) One could, of course, buy both domestic and imported alcohol from a variety of stores. [389](#) Even pulque could be procured in bottled form. [390](#)

Newspapers injected themselves into this aspect of its readership’s life and spectacularized it. They did this through such means as *La Guacamaya*’s contest for the best pulquería in which enthusiasts sent in coupons voting for their favourite establishment.

Started at the end of June, 1904, by September 1 the leader El Ancla had received 1417 votes [387](#) Examples of these categories include: *El Duende*, Nov. 15, 1904, 4; *El Moquete*, Feb. 16, 1905, 4; *El Diablito Bromista*, Apr. 12, 1907, 2 (for the Gran Salon Cuauhtémoc, modern restaurant and café serving

“exquisite national dishes” and whose motto is “SELL EXCELLENCE in order to acquire a large clientele.”); and *La Guacamaya*, July 18, 1906, 3 (for La Mascota restaurant, “Served by young ladies”).

[388](#) *El Duende*, Nov. 15, 1904 (a combined cantina and grocery store, or *almacen de abarrotes*, also advertised in *El Pinche*, Apr. 28, 1904, 2); *El Chango*, June 16, 1905, 3 (La Balanza de Comercio, a combined “Gran tienda y cantina”); and *La Guacamaya*, June 9, 1904, 3 (El Nuevo Continente, Café Cantina y Restaurante serving “exquisite beer”).

Pulquerías stand out as the most frequently advertised, listing not only the brands and/or origins of their drinks but all the food offered as an accompaniment: the “Gran Pulquería Los Pabellones” sold products from Sant Antonio, Ometusco, Tetepechilco and Guadalupe (*El Moquete*, July 30, 1904, 3); Gran Pulquería La Batalla de Puebla (*El Moquete*, July 3, 1904, 3); El Aguila de Oro offering pulque from the “famous haciendas” of S. Nicolás el Grande (*El Moquete*, Feb. 5, 1905, 4; also in *El Pinche*, Apr. 28, 1904, 2 in which it states it does not give out prizes and that its rewards

to customers include “Not adulterating the pulque, attending to its customers, and never increasing the price of its pulque to its consumers.”); the Fonda Los Bebedores featuring appetizing and succulent dishes to go with the “famous pulque El Aguila de Oro” (*El Moquete*, Feb. 15, 1905, 4); and Gran Pulquería Las Cazadora selling from the haciendas of Jalostoc and Tesoyo (*El Moquete*, Feb. 16, 1905, 4).

389 Ads for liquor stores and manufactures include: *La Palanca*, Sept. 11, 1904, 1; *El Moquete*, June 10, 1904, 4

(Tequila); *El Pinche*, Apr. 28, 1904, 2 (groceries, wines, and liquors, domestic and imported); and *El Pinche*, Apr. 28, 1904, 4 (“The best tequila in the world”).

390 *El Diablito Bromista*, May 31, 1908, 3. This particular vendor sold from six expendios around the city including the middle-class Ribera de San Cosme, offering pulque at the fairly steep price of five centavos per bottle.

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while runner up El Sueño de Amor had garnered 1000. By mid-December, El Ancla reached 6660 votes while El Atrevido assumed second place at 6603 votes received. [391](#)

These establishments were also hubs of working class consumption, spaces in which not only pulque and increasingly beer and falsified liquors were consumed, but also where vendors peddled knick-knacks and novelty items as well as the ubiquitous machine-rolled cigarettes of Buen Tono, Tabacalera Mexicana, and Cigarrera Mexicana. These cigarette companies, as Chapter One discussed, targeted a number of its brands at the lower classes.

The Cigarrera claimed that its products were “preferred by the working classes” [392](#) while the Tabacalera took a page from Dr. Hernández y Ortíz as it wrote ads such as the one in which it claimed that “Police commit as many legal infractions as smokers choose ‘Flor de Canela’

[brand cigarettes].” [393](#) Tabacalera Mexicana advertised the most in the Penny Press, often inserting lengthy, humorous articles under the guise of actual stories. [394](#) All the companies sponsored bullfights, theatre performances, and cinema shows aimed at this market. [395](#)

Commercialized leisure for the readership extended far beyond the drinking holes.

Bullrings, cinema salons, and theatres all placed advertisements in the press. [396](#) Even 391 See *La Guacamaya*, June 2, 1904, 3; Sept. 1, 1904, 3; and Dec. 15, 1904, 3.

392 *El Diablito Bromista*, Sept. 11, 1904, 1.

393 *El Diablito Bromista*, Oct. 1, 1905, 3.

394 See *El Diablito Bromista*, Oct. 8, 1905, 3; Nov. 19, 1905, 3-4; Nov. 26, 1905, 3. Also, *La Guacamaya*, Nov.

30, 1905, 2-3; Dec. 14, 1904, 3; Jan. 4, 1906, 3; June 11, 1906, 2-3; Jan. 18, 1906, 3; Jan. 25, 1906, 3; Feb. 8, 1906, 3; and Mar. 5, 1906, 3.

395 *El Diablito Bromista* covers a bullfight for customers and a banquet and prize ceremony for workers of La Tabacalera in lengthy articles dated Nov. 26, 1905, 1 and Feb. 3, 1906, 4, respectively.

396 Bullfights were advertised in: *El Papagayo*, Sept. 17, 1904, 3 (Plaza de Toros de Chapultepec); *El Diablito Bromista*, Apr. 26, 1903, 2 (Plaza de Toros México); *El Diablito Bromista*, April 26, 1903, 3 (Chapultepec); *El Diablito Bromista*, May 31, 1903, 3 (Chapultepec); *El Diablito Bromista*, Jan. 10, 1904, 1 (México); *El Diablito Bromista*, Jan. 31, 1904, 3 (México).

Cinema ads appeared less frequently, but the best which includes a list of titles (such as “The plebe without a Pulman”) appears in *El Diablito Bromista*, Aug. 7, 1904, 4. Theatres, such as the Teatro Popular advertised such events as puppet shows, including one whose puppeteer (Federico Confreras) won prizes at the New Orleans and Chicago Expositions: *La Guacamaya*, July 2, 1903, 1.

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Ricardo Bell, the most famous clown in Mexican history, advertised here. [397](#) By far the most commonly publicized entertainment was the circus. At least eight circuses advertised. [398](#)

Interestingly, the popular Orrin circus did not even though its star clown, Bell, did so after he struck out on his own. [399](#) Popular nationalism stands out in these ads as each circus vied to claim the status of the most Mexican. The Circo Treviño, Guerrero, Victoria and others made this claim to distinguish themselves from American circuses entering the capital. [400](#)

Other than ownership, this meant shunning the three-ring circus in favour of the traditional single ring, and the Gran Circo Victoria’s claim to have a Mexican clown (U. Noceda, a.k.a.

“Tonche”) likely sought to detract from Bell’s foreign origin. [401](#) As with the pulquerías, newspapers such as *El Diablito Bromista* placed themselves into the lives of their readership, in this case by offering discount coupons to the circus which reduced the price from 20 to 15

centavos. [402](#)

The technology of photography also grabbed the imagination of Mexico’s working classes. The heaviest advertiser was the “Gran Fotografía

‘Daguerre’” located in the heart of the city shopping district, Number 16, Puente de San Francisco. [403](#) They invited readers to come and visit their photo exhibitions, offered gold-leaf framing, and charged 50 centavos for a dozen miniatures, 10 centavos for larger sizes, and 25 centavos for portraits, all well 397 *Don Cucufate*, Sept. 3, 1906, 3. Special Collections in the Mary Landreth Library at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas, houses the Bell Family Collection.

398 These included the Gran Circo Gasca (Plazuela de la Aguilita), Circo Metropolitano (Calle de Matamoros), Gran Circo Bell, Gran Circo Treviño (Calzada de la Reforma), Gran Circo Metropolitano (Plazuela del Salto de Agua); Gran Circo Guerrero (11A Calle de Camelia), Gran Circo Lezama (Plazuela de la Aguilita); and Gran Circo Victoria.

399 An ad for the Gran Circo Bell and its 70 artists appears in *Don Cucufate*, Sept. 3, 1906, 3; and *La Guacamaya*, Sept. 30, 1906, 1.

400 Gran Circo Treviño, see *El Diablito Bromista*, Jan. 24, 1904, 1; Gran Circo Victoria, see *La Guacamaya*, Nov. 26, 1903, 3, and *El Diablito Bromista*, Feb. 14, 1904, 3; Gran Circo Guerrero, *El Diablito Bromista*, Aug.

28, 1904, 4.

401 “Clown Mexicano U. Noceda, aka Tonche” appears in *La Guacamaya*, Nov. 26, 1903, 3.

402 *El Diablito Bromista*, Feb. 14, 1904, 3. The title of the ad offering this discount headlines with

“¡¡¡INTERESANTE A LOS OBREROS!!!”

403 *El Chango*, May 28, 1905, 1; *El Diablito Bromista*, July 10, 1904, 4; *La Guacamaya*, Apr. 5, 1906, 1.

within the reach of semi-skilled and skilled workers. Of course, the store also offered a number of higher-priced options.

The advertisements of the Penny Press also reveal a working class which devoured cheap novels. The *Biblioteca Brillante* offered two novels for one centavo, including *Una victima del gran mundo* and *La esposa del muerto*. ⁴⁰⁴ Samuel Sánchez sold racy “Novelas Prohibidas” for two centavos, describing them as “Dramas íntimos del Amor. Misterios del Amor en la Mujer. Todo por el Amor!” Reflecting how quickly and how far new printing technologies trickled down, Sánchez noted that the novels were made of high quality paper (a dubious claim), in colour, and with photoengravings. ⁴⁰⁵ The “immense selection of

[chromolithographic] calendars for the New Year” advertised by a printing company reinforces this technology diffusion. ⁴⁰⁶ Other novels and offerings were more expensive, up to 25 centavos. The single most popular novel advertised was *Los 41*. ⁴⁰⁷ Rather than completely fictitious, *Los 41* narrated and sensationalized the scandal rocking the Porfirian elite after 41 sons of prominent families were caught engaged in a transvestite ball. The fascination of the lower classes with this event offers intriguing possibilities for studies of sexuality and gender but also by what mass-cultural means did *los de arriba* and *los de abajo* construct their understanding of each other. Both *La Cagarruta* and *Don Cucufate* offered readers coupons to purchase the account for only 15 centavos at their office. ⁴⁰⁸ The latter described it as “A sensational Mexican novel. A true and graphic relation of the scandalous queer dance [*baile de maricones*] in La Paz street.” It added that readers should rush their requests for the few copies remaining, noting that this would conclude the first edition of the ⁴⁰⁴ *El Duende*, Jan. 12, 1905, 4.

⁴⁰⁵ *La Guacamaya*, Feb. 18, 1904, 3.

⁴⁰⁶ *El Duende*, Nov. 15, 1904, 4.

407 Irwin, McCaughan, and Rocio Nasser, *The Famous 41*.

408 *La Cagarruta*, Dec. 20, 1906, 4; *Don Cucufate*, Aug. 5, 1906, 4.

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novel, “which has been so well-accepted across the Republic.” This last point of a national audience is important, as the vendors of this novel and others all offered to mail book orders anywhere in the Republic for 10 centavos more per copy. Like so many other products, booksellers relied on the agency system to distribute their product with Samuel Sánchez soliciting “Agents in all of the Republic” [409](#) and another seller offering its agents discounts of 25% on orders larger than a dozen copies. [410](#) What becomes obvious from these sales as well as the Penny Press itself is that by the mid-Porfiriato literacy had become a not uncommon skill among the lower classes and literature an essential transmitter of popular culture.

Medicine and medical services also sought to reach a market through the Penny Press.

Interestingly, the number and variety of ads were less numerous than in more mainstream publications. They were all, except in one case, Mexican products as opposed to imported. [411](#) Perhaps the imported medicines were too expensive. Another possibility is that Mexican products tended to rely on other forms of advertising such as “snake-oil salesmen”

who were known to draw crowds on urban streets. Dr. Enrique Hernandez y Ortiz and his

“Pildoritas Antibiliosas del Dr. Enrique Hernández Ortíz” was the medicine advertiser *par excellence*, placing ads in five of the 14 papers. [412](#) Whoever wrote the copy for his ads earned his keep, especially with the ad entitled

“Cosas Imposibles” mentioned earlier. Other than listing *El Imparcial* telling the truth as an impossibility he added a dozen others, including: that electric trams stop killing people; that there existed a policeman who did not beat his victims; that a federal deputy actually spoke up; that in Mexico free suffrage existed; that there was a *coyote* [labour recruiter] with noble instincts; and, finally, that the 409 *La Guacamaya*, Feb. 18, 1904, 3.

410 *El Pinche*, Dec. 1, 1904, 4.

411 The sole exception was the *Instituto Electrico Medico del Dr. S. S. Hall. Don Cucufate*, July 29, 1906, 3.

412 *El Chango, El Moquete, Don Cucufate, El Diablito Bromista, and La Guacamaya*.

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Antibilious Pills of Dr. Enrique Hernández Ortiz stopped producing successful results. [413](#)

Another example of how poorer Mexicans accessed modern forms of medicine comes from the ads for Dr. Gual. With the coupon attached to his advertisement and 25 centavos he offered the presenter both a consultation and free medicine. Without the coupon he offered private consultations between nine in the morning and noon for a peso, or general consultations between three and six o'clock for 50 centavos. [414](#) This description of his practice places Dr. Gual at the lowest tier of the westernized medical system in place during the Porfiriato. [415](#) The real surprise in this field comes from the presence of ads for Dr. S. S.

Hall's Instituto Eléctrico Medico located on Coliseo Viejo. [416](#) Dr. Hall advertised heavily in the mainstream press as he advertised the healthful benefits of his electric belts and electricity in general. [417](#) Advertising from at least 1900 through to the Revolution, the longevity of his business

suggests his success in the capital. In light of this, his attempts at penetrating such a seemingly unpromising market raise questions about how contemporaries viewed the consuming capacity of their society.

Advertisers in the press offered products ranging from the predictable to the startling given our assumption about the Porfirian popular classes. Candle factories offering products for religious obligations as well as domestic use understandably found a market for their solicitations. ⁴¹⁸ The sale of life insurance offered by La Mexicana Life Insurance Company to workers⁴¹⁹ piques interests while the funeral service ads of La Compañía Nacional de ⁴¹³ *El Moquete*, July 10, 1904, 4.

⁴¹⁴ *El Papagayo*, Aug. 7, 1904, 3-4; *La Guacamaya*, Sept. 29, 1904, 3-4.

⁴¹⁵ For an interesting description of these three levels of “care” and who patronizes them, see *El Imparcial*, Apr.

21, 1903, 1.

⁴¹⁶ See, for example, *Don Cucufate*, July 29, 1906, 3 or *El Diablito Bromista*, Nov. 19, 1905, 3.

⁴¹⁷ *El Imparcial*, Dec. 16, 1903, 4.

⁴¹⁸ For example, the “Gran Cereria el Sr. de Amecameca,” established in 1889 whose factory and retail shop faces onto the Plaza de San Juan, home of the Buen Tono cigarette factory. *La Palanca*, Oct. 2, 1904, 4.

⁴¹⁹ *El Diablito Bromista*, March 6, 1904, 1.

Inhumaciones compel a fit of black humour as they offer free caskets to the indigent and a discount for workers (or, more likely, their families) who present a copy of the advertisement. [420](#) Ads for sewing machine repairs bolster the importance of the sewing machine as an integral business technology among the working classes. [421](#) Equally intriguing are the ads for the Compañía Tortillera Mexicana “seeking 200,000 individuals of both sexes to consume [our] clean and delicious tortillas.” [422](#)

The sale of clothing and accessories figured prominently in the pages of the newspapers. Mexican hatmakers (*sombrererías*) advertised regularly, not a surprising fact given the importance of the *sombrero* to the identity and honour of the Mexican male. [423](#)

The presence of *platerías* or silver shops elicits no sense of wonder as such items decorated hats, boots, and jackets. [424](#) Haberdashery shops (*mercerías*) popped up occasionally supplying outfits for a male clientele, from gloves and neckties to shirts and hats. [425](#) *Ropa hecha*, or ready-made clothing stores suggest the degree to which the working class had begun to patronize fixed location stores for their essentials rather than open markets. [426](#) The absence of the larger retail and department stores in these papers rings odd since they did sell bargain-priced merchandise to this clientele from the ground floor and the tables placed just outside the front doors. [427](#)

Although popular consumption patterns differed from those of the more affluent, particularly in the realm of home furnishings, a thought-provoking number of retailers for these items marketed quite heavily in the Penny Press. Wall paper, wood furniture, and [420](#) *Ibid.*, Jan. 6, 1907, 1; July 7, 1907, 1.

[421](#) *Ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1907, 4.

[422](#) *Ibid.*, July 10, 1904, 4.

[423](#) *El Diablito Bromista*, Apr. 26, 1903, 2.

424 *El Duende*, Nov. 15, 1904, 4.

425 *La Palanca*, Oct. 30, 1904, 2. This is a continuous ad.

426 *La Palanca*, Oct. 16, 1904, 2. This is a continuous ad.

427 For a visual display of this, see the ad for *El Surtidor* in *El Imparcial*, Jan. 17, 1905, 5.

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crystal ware sought a clientele. [428](#) Blas Pahisa y Compañía offered an inventory including wardrobes, trousseaux, dressers, nightstands, beds and mattresses. [429](#) The bed factory *El Vulcano* offered “an immense selection” of tin and iron beds as well as mattresses in “all sizes and prices.” [430](#) El Vulcano was probably the largest bedframe maker in the Republic and advertised heavily in the mainstream press, both alone or often cross-advertised with the Buen Tono cigarette company in its famous cartoons which often ended up with the hero smoking a *Canela Pura* brand cigarette, drinking a *Moctezuma* brand beer, while relaxing on a Vulcano brand bed. Given the competition between the cigarette companies around this time period it should come as no surprise that just as El Vulcano teamed up with El Buen Tono, the competitor La Tabacalera Mexicana should do the same with the bed maker “La Industrial.” In one such ad on the front page of *El Diablito Bromista* a charro smokes a *Flor de Canela* while lying on a bed from La Industrial. [431](#)

A reader cannot help but notice the different gendering of consumption in the advertising of the four press narratives of the Porfiriato. Switching between, say, *El Mundo Ilustrado* or *El Tiempo* on the one hand, and *El Diablito Bromista* or *La Risa* on the other, one is struck between the targetting and construction of a female consumer in the gente decente and

Catholic press and the catering of the hedonist and working class press to a male consumer. Only one ad in the Penny Press, for the Medicinal Wine (*vino medicinal*) of Dr.

428 For wallpaper, see *El Diablito Bromista*, Aug. 21, 1904, 1; for cristalerías, see *La Palanca*, Oct. 30, 1904, 2; for furniture producers other than those noted below, see Gran Mueblería of Pedro Gómez in *La Palanca*, Nov.

6, 1904, 4, offering a variety of qualities (*muebles finos y corrientes*), tin beds, cotton and wool mattresses, an assortment of furniture styles, and promises that “It is the business that sells for the lowest price in all of the Republic.”

429 *El Diablito Bromista*, July 10, 1904, 4.

430 *Ibid.*, July 10, 1904, 4.

431 *Ibid.*, Feb. 11, 1906, 1.

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Hernández y Ortiz, directly addresses a female audience. [432](#) Compare this with Chapter Three, in which modern bourgeois retailing focuses on the female as the agent of consumption for the Mexican household. Although this does not tell us the actual consuming patterns of households—tantalizing evidence suggests Mexicans breached such lines regularly in daily life—they do suggest a fractured cultural ideal of how individuals and larger social groupings were to behave in a modern nation.

Finally, a comment on the consumption of imported and so-called luxury goods by the working class. When historians speak of Porfirian modernization on a social and cultural level they often point to the consumption of imported goods by the middle and upper classes.

This assumption has a considerable element of truth. Imported goods (and establishments selling them) were the most commonly advertised goods in the big dailies and weeklies. As new products and not “necessaries” they needed to find a market. They had the budget resources to do it and newspapers did hit their target demographics. Beyond advertising visibility, the actual quantity and variety of foreign goods entering Mexico during the Porfiriato was impressive. Their element of “foreignness” marked them as items of social display and conspicuous consumption. For this reason historical accounts list off displays of foreign finery in the form of clothing, carriages, automobiles, phonographs, and, of course, those famous banquet menus. [433](#)

432 *El Moquete*, June 10, 1904, 4. Before explaining how the wine will strengthen the blood and preserve the health of its consumers the ad asserts that a woman’s beauty ensures “the admiration of your spouses.”

433 For a discussion of the braiding of conspicuous consumption, politics, and gender during the Porfiriato, see Macías González, “The *Lagartijo* at *The High Life*.” For a sample of three scholarly criticisms of Porfirian elite consumption, see Adolfo Gilly, ed., *Interpretaciones de la Revolución Mexicana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980); Moisés González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: la vida social*, vol. 4 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed. Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972); and Juan Felipe Leal, “El Estado y el Bloque en el Poder, 1867-1914,” *Historia Mexicana* 23, no. 4 (April-June 1974): 700-721. A far less polemical and far more enlightening interpretation of Porfirian elite conspicuous consumption comes from William H. Beezley, “The Porfirian Smart Set Anticipates Thorstein Veblen in Guadalajara,” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1961).

Yet these accounts overlook the banal and quotidian. They focus on the extravagant and on only the largest papers thought both to carry advertisements for these goods and reach the respectable classes who consumed them. Less glamorous yet monumental domestic production and consumption transformations go unnoticed or at least unrelated. Domestic light manufacturing of consumer goods and foreign investment in their production expanded considerably during the Porfiriato, making local production more responsive and more capable of filling domestic consumer demand in areas including food, textiles, cigarettes, pulque, beer, and furniture among others—exactly those items advertised in the Penny Press and, to a lesser degree, in the pages of its competitors. ⁴³⁴ We should keep in mind that most Mexicans could not afford on a daily basis the imported clothing, food, and other goods that were heavily advertised in the newspapers.

Instead, stock luxury items are usually trotted out because their seeming incongruity with the host country possesses a delicious shock value. It also provides a convenient device by which to express disgust as well as to parody the Porfirian elite. Focusing on “luxury”

and “foreignness” makes the attack easy. It makes consumerism, and, by extension, capitalism, appear imported and not something good Mexicans associated with. This ahistorical approach should elicit laughs considering that Mexicans have been importing many of their consumer goods from Europe since the Conquest. By using the familiar trope of associating luxury with decadence and femininity, writers portray the consumers of these 1994). On Porfirian banquets, see Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Qué vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 64-65.

⁴³⁴ For information on one or several of these categories and the development of the domestic consumer market, consult: Mario Cerutti,

Burguesía, capitals e industria en el norte de México: Monterrey y su ámbito regional (1850-1910) (Monterrey: Alianza Editorial, 1992); Barbara Hibino, “Cervecería Cuauhtémoc: A Case Study of Technological and Industrial Development in Mexico,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 8, no. 1

(Winter 1992): 23-43; Sandra Kuntz Ficker, *Empresa extranjera y mercado interno: El Ferrocarril Central Mexicano, 1880-1907* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1995); Aurora Gómez Galvarriato Freer,

“Industrialización, empresas y trabajadores industriales, del Porfiriato a la Revolución: la nueva historiografía,”

Historia Mexicana 52, no. 3 (January-March 2003): 773-805.

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goods as demonstrating their unsuitability as leaders. Of course, these consumers—always elite—are typically portrayed as engaged in a wholesale adoption of foreign goods and meaning, never an adaptation.

In most cases, for authors of these portrayals the meaning and consumer of these goods is fixed. The label “import” becomes conflated with “elite” and “luxury.” Rarely if ever do they consider that meaning is fungible, that consumption is less about the purchase than the possession of a good—what the consumer does with it.

Consider the phonograph. By all accounts it was an imported good targeted at the elite and especially the gente decente as yet another indicator of the bourgeois obsession with domesticity and the increasing role of the house interior as a public display of social status. [435](#) President Díaz himself received a phonograph finished with gold leaf and a personal inscription

from Edison himself, a clear indication of both the target market for the good and of Edison's grasp of the social phenomenon of trickle-down emulation. [436](#)

Yet the phonograph quickly became a staple of popular urban culture. Too expensive for working-class individuals to own, entrepreneurs soon set up shop on the streets and attached headphones or charged crowds for the thrill of hearing recorded voices. [437](#) As mentioned earlier with the patent applications, advertising also picked up the phonograph as 435 Berta Tello Peón, "Intención decorativo en los objetos de uso cotidiano de los interiores domésticos del Porfiriato," in Elena Estrada de Gerleso, ed., *El Arte y la vida cotidiana* (XVI coloquio internacional de historia del arte; Mexico City: UNAM Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1995), 139-154; Auslander, *Taste and Power*; and Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 23-116.

436 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Sept. 16, 1904, 3. With the US ambassador to Mexico present, Edison's representatives presented Díaz on his birthday with a phonograph specially constructed in Menlo Park. Entirely adorned with gold leaf, it bore a plaque with the following inscription: "Special phonograph presented by Thomas Alva Edison to his Excellence, General Porfirio Díaz, President of Mexico, September 15, 1904."

437 Both of the following approved petitions to set up public phonographs charged one centavo per song: Mariano González to the Ayuntamiento, June 12, 1902, exp. 1186, *Diversiones Públicas*, AACM; and Francisco Granada to the Ayuntamiento, Aug. 13, 1902, exp. 1191, *Diversiones Públicas*, AACM.

a medium and incorporated it as a street attraction. One editorial complaint about these phonograph *ambulantes* conveys this transformation:

We earnestly call the attention of the authorities to the itinerant phonographs which are a veritable danger to public health and morality. Outside of the skin maladies which they claim to cure, the phonographs produce popular songs [*chansons ordinaires*] that perhaps delight street urchins but are an attack on public morality.

We ask the police to control the repertoire and to conduct surveillance close to the street empresarios. [438](#)

Advertising in the Penny Press supports this diffusion and cooption of this imported luxury.

Edison's agent, Jorge Alcalde, advertised phonographs and cinema projectors—that other imported bourgeois entertainment transformed into a popular form. [439](#) More assertive proof of the Mexicanization and popularization of the phonograph comes from the advertising of Joaquin Espinosa located on Calle Tacuba. He offered “A complete selection of talking machines, all classes and prices.” More importantly, he reveals a domestic recording industry as he highlights “popular recordings [*Fonogramas populares*], pressed by Sres.

Rosales y Murillo.” [440](#) Phonographs are but one example of how certain imported goods, even supposed luxury goods, found a much deeper market than is traditionally assumed.

It is this constant reworking of consumer goods and the texts used to sell them—

advertising—by which Porfirian social groups generated the cultural meaning that provided both an identity for the self as well as the world around them. We can observe this process by discarding traditional notions of cultural production, diffusion, and adoption as well as by embracing a more ecumenical definition of sources. The rewards include unequivocal evidence of a broad-based culture of consumption. Deeply fractured, this

consumer market includes a working class consumer culture which, until recently, the historical imagination of 438 *L'Echo du Mexique*, April 24, 1895, 2.

439 See, for example, *El Diablito Bromista*, Nov. 27, 1904, 4.

440 *La Guacamaya*, Dec. 15, 1902, 3.

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the Porfiriato had completely overlooked. The acceptance of the market economy as well as modernizing consumer goods did not imply an acceptance of Porfirian political or cultural policies. Instead, through the emission and consumption of cultural meaning attached to the advertising and consumer goods that increasingly defined the visual reality of the city competing social groups developed multiple images of possible urban modernity.

Consumerism transformed public and private physical space in the capital; advertising and the urban press provided some of the major narrative and the perceptual filters for capitalinos to evaluate the transformation. Envisioning the city as a cultural creation constructed through efforts to realize social and political objectives one better understands how the daily actions and choices of a multitude of businesses, ad agents, marketing innovators, lithographers, printers, journalists, and consumers—not just “the State”—made the city in some degree their own. Rather than simple dichotomies of consumers versus nonconsumers, mindless modernizers versus unflinching traditionalists, I argue that the competing visions of Mexico City were all modernizing, merely debating over the pace, strategy, and social structure of the change. This was a competition over how—not whether—to shape the future of the city. And in the case of such a highly centralized polity as the Mexican Republic—in which the capital overwhelmingly concentrates political, religious, economic and cultural

influence—the significance of portraying the most accepted image takes on added resonance.

As goes the capital, so, too, goes the nation when it comes to envisioning oneself as part of an imagined community.

Chapter Three

Capital Investments I:

Porfirian Department Stores and the Evolution of Mexico City Retailing

Nothing made modernity more tangible for urban Mexicans than the department store. Born in 1891, midway through the Porfiriato, the department store signalled a maturing and deepening consumer market capable of supporting no less than nine such stores by the Revolution. Respectable society and their political leadership invested themselves deeply into these institutions. Stocked with the goods of a modern national and global economy, serving as an institution of *gente decente*, and securing an urban transformation program jointly undertaken by the State and private capital, the department store symbolized the apparent triumph of the Porfirian development project and the ascendance of its dominant class. The department store functioned as an essential cultural primer, educating its customers on how to look, behave, think, and therefore *be* modern. Department stores marked the latest refinement in a transnational process whereby members of modern nation-states learned that citizenship meant engaging in proper consumption activities as well as production.

Yet while Porfirians chattered incessantly on the significance of department stores the academic historiography addresses this issue only tangentially. John Lear and others touch on their labour relations but most scholars dismiss them as elite institutions. [441](#) Only Jürgen 441 John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln:

University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 49-86; Aurora Gómez Galvarriato Freer, “The Impact of Revolution: Business and Labor in the Mexican Textile Industry, Orizaba, Veracruz, 1900-1930” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999).

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Buchenau in his research on Casa Boker, the famous German hardware store in Mexico, has given the department store its due as a modernizing institution in Porfirian Mexico. [442](#)

Still, no history of what most consider the “classic” department store currently exists for Porfirian Mexico. Casa Boker is undoubtedly a department store—broken into distinct merchandising sections—but it emphasized hardware and only grudgingly moved into other product lines. Moreover, its owners did not pursue modern advertising and display techniques until much later in the Porfiriato. What this study considers is the stores along the lines of the Bon Marché in Paris or Wanamakers in Philadelphia. This refers to stores whose inventory weighs heavily towards a mix of garments, fashion accessories, and home furnishings among other items as well as employing modern advertising and display techniques designed to cultivate desire. Often mentioned but never carefully examined, the Porfirian department store and a more general account of the evolution of retailing in nineteenth-century Mexico remain poorly understood. Part of this absence in the historiography stems from the difficulty of writing business histories in Mexico. Family companies and corporations alike are far more guarded with their archives than North American firms. [443](#) This, of course, assumes that historical records exist. Fires, neglect, and [442](#) Jurgen Buchenau, *Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865-Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004). Aurora Gómez Galvarriato Freer has achieved a similar goal indirectly through the investigation of the textile industry and its connection with

department stores through their ownership. She is one of a number of economic historians in Mexico constructing a solid economic foundation to a historiography of daily and material culture that cultural historians have left untouched. For an overview of this movement, see Aurora Gómez Galvarriato Freer, "Industrialización, empresas y trabajadores industriales del Porfiriato á la Revolución: La nueva historiografía," *Historia Mexicana* 52, no. 3 (Jan.-Mar. 2003): 773-804.

443 An example is my attempt to access the archives of the Puerto de Liverpool department store, one of two remaining Porfirian-era department stores. Despite introductions from my contacts at the Palacio de Hierro and other connections, I was informed that a soon-to-be-released store history commemorating its 150 year anniversary (just under 100 years as a department store) would answer any questions. The resulting product attributed to Anilú Elías, *150 años de costumbres, modas y Liverpool* (Mexico City: El Puerto de Liverpool, 1997) is nearly useless as a historical source. It is a largely fictional account of founding families, *capitalino* society, and the store that culminates in a bubbly outlook for the store's future. The account's rambling, flowery prose reminiscent of an English garden provides no citations, few dates, and a baffling narrative. The 167

the troubles of the Revolution further diminish sources. [444](#) This, combined with the ideological imperatives of the Porfirian Black Legend produced by the Revolution continues to shape the popular image of Porfirian department stores as vendors of imported goods and preserves of the elite who could afford them. This stereotype, like any other, possesses an element of truth, but this chapter will demonstrate that department stores were far more complicated institutions than this characterization allows.

A variety of sources help to answer questions of store ownership, staffing, customers, retailing practices, provenance of goods sold, and cultural role in Porfirian society. Despite the lack of studies in Mexico, since the early 1980s historians of Europe and the United States have enriched an existing historiography of department stores in these centres of modern

consumerism by incorporating social and cultural dimensions into their work. [445](#)

These establish a baseline of comparison with stores established in “peripheral” nations such as Mexico. Newspapers, including those of the American and French colony, join travellers’

photos are, however, quite lovely. Unfortunately, the history fails to enlighten us to any degree on the actual workings, composition, or character of the store.

444 Most historians working outside of the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe understand the problem of not just document but also archive neglect. In specific consideration of department stores, the Palacio de Hierro suffered from a fire in 1914 that destroyed the store and most of its records. Even the remaining *copiadores* to which I had access suffered from singed leather casings. This fire began from an electrical short in one of the display windows, a fate suffered by other department stores. *La Valenciana* owned by Sebastian Robert burned down in 1900, leading Robert to move into the *Centro Mercantil* in 1901. In the new building several years later another display window electrical fire threatened the store once again. For the original fire, see *El Imparcial*, Sept. 28, 1900, 1. On the later fire in the Centro Mercantil, see *La Semana Mercantil*, Apr. 16, 1906, 182.

445 The earliest and still best cultural history of the department store belongs to Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). Miller anchors his cultural analysis with a thorough consideration of the business and labour history of the store. The result is an enduring example of how cultural history should be written. Other contributions to the historiography include: Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); Rosalind Williams,

Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters and the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Cynthia Wright,

“‘Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance’: Writing Gender into the History of Consumption” in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History*, eds. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 229-260.

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accounts, commercial directories, and the archives of Finance Minister José Yves Limantour in piecing together the characteristics of general retailing as well as department stores. Rare access to the surviving *copiadores* of the Palacio de Hierro department store provide insight into the internal workings of arguably the most important of these stores and verify secondary accounts. Finally, a surge of interest in regional history in France supports this endeavour. Over the past two decades historians of the Barcelonnette region in southeast France have marshalled findings in local and Paris archives to account for the nearly incredible role of the Barcelonnette immigrants in the economic development of Mexico prior to the Revolution in 1910. [446](#)

Combined with Chapter Four, this chapter will sketch a cultural history of the Porfirian department store. By cultural I mean an inclusive history, taking into account not only how department stores participated in the production of meaning but also the social, economic, business, technological, and political dimensions of these institutions. [447](#) An introductory case study of the Centro Mercantil inauguration serves to demonstrate the cultural and symbolic meaning these institutions possessed

for the *gente decente* and the 446 The first of monograph of this field appears to belong to Patrice Gouy, *Pérégrinations des “Barcelonnettes”*

au Mexique (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1980). The best and least hagiographical is the most recent, a collection of essays and other contributions from 16 historians and ancestors of the Barcelonnettes: François Arnaud, Anselme Charpenel, Léon Martin, André Signoret, and Elie Borel, eds., *Les Barcelonnettes au Mexique: récits et témoignages* (Barcelonnette: Sabença de la Valeia, 1994). A source for information but altogether hagiographical and uncritical of the French *mission civilisatrice* is Raymonde Antiq-Auvaro, *L’émigration des Barcelonnettes au Mexique* (Nice: Editions Serre, 1992). More useful is Maurice Proal and Pierre Martin Charpenel, *L’Empire des Barcelonnettes au Mexique* (Marseille: Editions Jeanne Laffitte, 1986).

This work is translated, given a prologue by Mexican historian Jean Meyer, and slightly edited for its Mexican audience (note the change in title) in Proal and Charpenel, *Los Barcelonnettes en México* (Mexico City: Editorial Clío, 1998). Also available in Spanish is a condensed version of Gouy’s book in the form of an article: Gouy, “Peregrinaciones de los Barcelonnettes a México” in *Artes de México* no. 39 (1997): 62-67. This edition, entitled *Francia-México: Imagenes Compartidas*, is part of a broader trend in Mexico and France to commemorate the cultural ties between these two nations (something of a defense against American influence).

Mexican historians—many with French ancestry—have contributed to this renaissance of “pan-Latinism,” the most notable and worthwhile example found in the collection of Javier Pérez Siller, Coordinador, *México Francia: Memoria de una sensibilidad común, Siglos XIX-XX* (Mexico City: Editorial Ducere, 1998).

447 This idea of an inclusive history, or *histoire totale*, is not an original one. For a recent and thoughtful consideration of this approach, consult Eric Van Young, “La pareja dispareja: breves comentarios acerca de la relación entre historia económica y cultural,” *Historia Mexicana* 52, no. 3 (Jan.–Mar. 2003): 831-872.

Porfirian regime. What follows is an overview analysis of the department stores of Mexico City (and, to some degree, those throughout the Republic). Consideration of ownership, organization, product sourcing, financing, employees, clientele, and a range of marketing techniques precedes a concluding observation on the place of these institutions within a broader commercialization of the city and Mexican society.

Inaugurations

Department store inauguration ceremonies reflected both the kind of society Porfirians desired and their perception of the cultural utility of these institutions. They acted as “dramatic statements of the dominant culture” [448](#) much in the same manner as colonial viceregal processions or contemporary elite-sponsored public spectacles such as charity kermesses or increasingly secularized and commercialized holiday festivities. [449](#) In these celebrations Porfirians staged a drama projecting their cultural principles and categories as they acted out a world organized the way they saw it. Specifically, through the use of goods they expressed gender roles, class hierarchies, and—ever an issue in Mexican modernization plans—racial solutions. This enactment served both to reaffirm their beliefs and to educate onlookers—whether they be in attendance or reading about it the following day in the newspapers. Unlike other time-specific “rituals of rule” (including Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo’s [448](#) William H. Beezley, “The Porfirian Smart Set Anticipates Thorstein Veblen in Guadalajara,” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, eds. William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin and William E. French (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 175.

[449](#) For an example of vice-regal processions, see Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, “Giants and Gypsies: Corpus Christi in Colonial Mexico City,” in Beezley, Martin, and French, eds., *Rituals of Rule*, 1-26; for Porfirian charity events see Víctor Manuel Macías-González, “The Mexican Aristocracy and Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911” (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1999), 80-141; and for commercialized Porfirian holidays consult Steven B.

Bunker, “‘Consumers of Good Taste:’ Marketing Modernity in Northern Mexico, 1890-1910,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 227-269.

World's Fair exhibitions) the stages of these cultural dramas remained. [450](#) Department stores became permanent fixtures in the urban geography, their cultural impact continuous.

The inauguration of the Centro Mercantil offers an exemplary entrance into the grafting of commerce onto public rituals of domination. [451](#) The Centro hosted its party on the cusp of the new century, September 2, 1899, and—more importantly—only two weeks before the pursestrings loosening celebrations surrounding President Díaz's birthday and national independence. Surging crowds at the downtown intersection of Tlalpaleros and Monterilla made transit a near impossibility. Granted, at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on *any* day, even on a Saturday, the traffic flow at this southwest corner of the Zócalo could never be described as uncongested. The inauguration merely made a bad situation worse. Even the vigilant presence of a mounted *gendarmérie* unit could barely contain the unpredictability of the “enormous crowd of the curious.”

The building itself generated a sense of civic pride and its sheer size compounded the sense of spectacle surrounding the ceremony. Its architecture unabashedly stamped Porfirian taste on the physical space of the city. Although not the first department store in the city, it could now boast, however briefly, to be the largest. The first of its three storefronts occupied one-third of the Portal de Mercaderes, then wrapped its four storeys of glass and columns around the first full block of Tlalpaleros Street before concluding its presence on the equally trendy Palma Street. Twelve-foot high glass display windows housed the latest in imported and domestic finery as well as Mexican flags and bunting in the national colours. This elegance and progressive spirit defined the internal as well as the external qualities of the 450 Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

451 Today the Centro Mercantil is the Gran Hotel. Unless otherwise cited, the following account may be found in *El Imparcial*, Sept. 3, 1899, 2; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Sept. 5, 1899, 3; and J. Figueroa Domenech, *Guía*

general descriptiva de la República Mexicana, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Ramón de S. N. Araluce, 1899), 760-761.

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new edifice. Upon entering the foyer the eyes of visitors would be drawn to the grand staircase before them. Italian white marble steps and burnished mahogany railings divided to deliver shoppers to the left or the right side of the second and third floor of departments.

Before ascending they could peruse the flawless glass display cases of each department, all artfully arranged and beautifully lit with odour- and soot-free electric incandescent light supplemented by arc-lighting for the inaugural event. High above the entrance way an enormous stained glass window complete with the monogram of the store provided more light and colour for the interior. An electric elevator transported shoppers and goods to the upper floors. [452](#) Among other conveniences, the Centro Mercantil, reportedly emulating the Louvre department store in Paris, installed a dining room offering a free buffet and refreshments.

Through

the

hoi polloi strode the leadership of the city and nation. The political importance of the event could not have been clearer. A veritable “Who’s Who” of Mexican society appeared for the champagne lunch and tour, upstaged only by the star power of the attending President Díaz and most of his ministers, District Governor José W. de Landa y Escandón, and an assortment of other high functionaries and members of the foreign diplomatic corps. Each guest received a ribbon of national colours attached to a commemorative medal: on one side, the Virgin of Guadalupe; on the reverse, images of Centro Mercantil president José de Teresa y Miranda and two other top officials.

The ritual representation of a hierarchical society unified through *noblesse oblige* began with plate glass separating the symbolic head of Mexican society within the store and the body without. Days earlier, members of the assembled elite had received from Teresa y 452 The citation for—and photos of—the elevator and stained-glass window is from Proal and Charpenel, *Barcelonnettes en México*, 42-43.

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Miranda coupons valid for free clothing redeemable at the inauguration. The coupons were to be distributed by the elite among the city's poor. The recipients, numbering between 500

and 3000, depending on the account now filed one-by-one into the store to receive their gifts.

Officially this act of charity served to bring prosperity to the new establishment, but beneath this lay a pattern of action typical of Porfirian elites at their public ceremonies. Selfless acts by the individual or, in this case, private enterprise, theoretically negated the need for organized state assistance and reaffirmed the historical, indeed Biblical, social covenant by which the poor traded obedience and deference in return for the protection of the powerful.

Moreover, the choice of clothing as a gift highlights the perceived pedagogical role of consumption in the Porfirian modernizing vision and underscores the unity of vision shared by the political and commercial leadership of the period. True national progress required not only economic but also cultural modernization. The need to shift the behavioural and consumption patterns of the lower classes to achieve visually the idealized efficiency and well-ordered society of more advanced North Atlantic nations antedated the Porfiriato but it is during this period that the Mexican

elite had the wherewithal and cultural momentum to make a concerted effort to educate their social inferiors with a variety of carrot and stick approaches.

President Díaz proceeded to make literal to the assembled his symbolic role as the national *pater familia* or—perhaps more specific to the rural economic and social tradition of Mexico—as the *patrón* of the nation. Not only had he distributed ten of the clothing coupons prior to the event, he also stood behind a shop counter to receive the first recipient. Handing out cuts of high-quality percale fabric he performed his role of benevolent provider in this high social theatre. To dispel any confusion between him and a shop clerk (or perhaps 173

suffering flashbacks from his earlier days as a shop assistant in Oaxaca⁴⁵³) he repeated the act only a few times before turning over the chore to “high-ranking [male] employees” who added shoes and other components necessary in the assemblage of a respectable outfit.

Respectable but not fancy. The choice of percale as a fabric was one consciously made. It was the fabric selected for the Porfirian working class: durable and aesthetically civilizing in its distinctiveness from traditional and coarser Indian cottons. ⁴⁵⁴ In 1892 Emile Chabrand specifically noted the hierarchy of clothing in the *cajones de ropa* of the capital. ⁴⁵⁵

He described the stocking of the *tarima*, the massive wooden shelving system located behind the shop counter (the *mostrador*) which separated customer from attending clerk. On the lowest level employees stocked “Indians and percales” with each ascending level supporting a better class of material. ⁴⁵⁶ The inauguration ritual thereby reinforced traditional social hierarchies with the idea of proper consumption wherein each citizen consumed appropriate to his or her social station.

The

tarima serves as a metaphor not only of class but also of racial attitudes.

Mexican society has always interwoven categories of race and class as tightly as the fibres used to make those percale and “Indian” fabrics (in fact, probably tighter). Historically, darker skin signalled a lower social and economic class that those advancing up the social ladder sought to lighten through the use of better clothing, skin-whitening chemicals, and—in the case of the colonial period—the outright purchase of official documentation declaring the 453 Paul Garner, *Porfirio Díaz* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 27.

454 Dawn Keremetsis, *La Industria textil Mexicana en el siglo XIX* (Mexico City: SepSetentas, 1973), 123-124, briefly discusses the use of cheap percale fabric among the lower classes, particularly for women.

455 Émile Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique* (Paris: Plon, Nourrit et Cie., 1892), 386-387.

456 “Indian” cloth refers to printed calicot of the sort originally imported from India and then later taken over and industrialized by mills in Manchester and Rouen.

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bearer as *criollo*, or of Spanish and not Indian blood. [457](#) In Porfirian Mexico, the drive for economic progress required a labour pool imbued with the productive habits (attitudes towards hygiene, time, thrift, and sobriety) and consumption patterns (diet, clothes, leisure activities, home utensils and adornments) associated with the apparent success of Western European and North American workers. For both foreign and domestic observers Indians represented the antithesis of this model and a drag on the development of internal production and consumption markets.

The sale and significance of “Indian” cloth in Mexico is both an example of nineteenth-century globalization and the shifting meaning of words.

“Indian” refers not to Mexico’s indigenous population but rather to the South Asian origin of the printed calico imported into England and France. Industrialized mills in Manchester, Alsace and Rouen destroyed the textile economy in India but retained the name for this type of cloth. [458](#)

Mexico imported this material but by the mid-Porfiriato most of this class of material was produced domestically. Coarser than percale, this calico or Indian fabric was popular with the indigenous population in Mexico and I suspect that this situation transferred the meaning of “Indienne” cloth from the Asian subcontinent to the native population of Mexico. Percale is usually a much finer fabric than calico, hence the prestige attached to percale bedsheets.

However, Porfirian Mexican textile mills produced differing qualities and a cheaper and more durable version of it became the common material for both the uniforms which clothed ⁴⁵⁷ On the purchase of “whiteness” and the colonial caste system see Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E.

Rodríguez O., *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 199-201. For the light-skinned Porfirian ideal, see Macías-González, “The Mexican Aristocracy,” especially pages 142-202; and Stacie G. Widdifield, *The Embodiment of the National in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexican Painting* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996) cited in Macías-González,

“The Mexican Aristocracy,” 153. Today, skin-whitening creams are widely available. Pond’s sells a popular version advertised throughout Mexico City which claims that its product whitens the skin not for racial reasons but rather to repair the damage done by sun and air pollution to one’s original skin tone.

⁴⁵⁸ For a great deal of information on “calicot,” including its manufacture and slang usage in the nineteenth century, consult the 1866 version of the *Larousse Dictionnaire Universel*, s.v. “calicot.”

the thousands of female workers employed in the modern manufacturing sector as well the daily clothes which marked the humble respectability of members on the lower economic rungs of respectable society.

Switching from Indian to percale fabric did not necessarily change one's situation economically, but it did so culturally; a horizontal if not vertical move on the social ladder.

Such a move—voluntary or not—suggested the renouncement of economically and culturally backwards indigenous attitudes and behaviours and identified the wearer as a participant in the Porfirian modernization program and thus a pretender to membership within the *gente decente*.

This emphasis on outward appearances, so important to the Porfirian image construction of a modern society, provides a clue as to why contemporary society placed such a premium on consumption generally, and department stores specifically, as civilizing agents. Department stores, with their attraction of a clientele spanning most of the social spectrum and professed direction towards the “democratization of luxury” seemed the ideal institutions through which to achieve this. Perhaps one of the starkest examples of this common attitude comes from Auguste Génin in his *Notes sur le Mexique* written at the end of the Porfiriato. Génin, a prominent member of the French community, had lived in Mexico most of his life and had carved out a career as both businessman and indefatigable booster of the Porfirian regime. In *Notes sur le Mexique* he expresses Porfirian positivist and social Darwinian attitudes as he portrays the overwhelming success of Díaz's modernization program. [459](#) At the same time, he positions the French community as integral to this achievement, particularly in the modernizing of the populace, as he disclosed [459](#) Auguste Génin, *Notes Sur Le Mexique* (Mexico City: Imprenta Lacaud, 1908-1910). See, especially, pages 108-112.

characteristically French attitudes towards their global civilizing mission and fascination with exotic cultures. On his pages he masterfully combines mutually reinforcing visual and written texts, most notably the juxtaposition of department stores with images of nearly-naked Indians or “traditional Mexican types” such as the *China Poblana*. His visual implication becomes statement in his narrative that these charming but backwards Mexican categories will soon become little more than museum displays under the civilizing force of modern consumption. “Under the equalizing process that occurs to all those who have experienced the displays of the Palacio de Hierro, the Ciudad de Londres, or the windows of the Fábricas Universales. . . or the Importador—which are the Bon Marchés, the Louvres, and the Printemps of the Mexican capital—the *Jarrochos* of Veracruz, the *Apaches* of Sonoras, the gracious *Poblanas*. . . and the *Indias* of Amatlán, all are white under their veils, having disappeared forever.” [460](#) Génin simply expressed the prevalent hope that department stores and the modern consumption and fashion that they promoted could homogenize, whiten, and modernize the citizenry of the Republic so that it could take its proper place among the fraternal order of civilized nations.

In addition to their low social class and probable Indian or *mestizo* racial background the recipients shared another indisputable quality: their sex. Every single one was female.

This exclusivity of gender begs an explanation. One could glibly claim that confining the gift to a single sex made the distribution task easier. Perhaps the visual symbolism of father Díaz providing for the daughters of the nation played a deciding factor. More likely, the exclusion of males reflects an intersection of a growing consumer culture with the gender roles idealized by *gente decente* society.

460 *Ibid.*, 108.

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Nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, whether called Porfirian or Victorian, ascribed to a separation of gender spheres, of masculine and feminine realms, between public and private, or production and consumption. [461](#) Following the analysis of conspicuous consumption by Thorstein Veblen, [462](#) one of the most important expressions of a family's social position and respectability originated in the appearance of its female members, particularly the wife. In the most simplistic form of this vision men produced in the public sphere so that women could consume for the family and develop the private, or domestic, sphere. [463](#) The fact that women increasingly frequented the quite public downtown shopping areas to acquire the goods for their families readily belies the shaky practicality of this ideal.

Nevertheless, the image of masculine Díaz providing for his extended family of female consumers seems to make this ideal explicit. Another fact supports this analysis: the strict gender segregation and male-to-female direction of this charitable aid stands in sharp contrast with most non-commercial charity events where elite women catered to the poor of usually both sexes. [464](#)

[461](#) The seminal work in understanding the concept of gender remains Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1067-1075; and Joan Wallach Scott,, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York:

Columbia University Press, 1988). For Porfirian Mexico, consult William E. French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 87-139; Macías-González, “The Mexican Aristocracy”; and Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato, “Tales of Two Women: The Narrative Construal of Porfirian Reality,” *The Americas* 55, no. 3 (January 1999): 391-424. For other useful works on gender in post-Independence Mexico (as well as colonial) see Carmen Ramos Escandón, ed., *Presencia y transparencia: La mujer en la historia de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1987); and Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1989).

462 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967). First published in 1899. For a humorous application of Veblen’s theory into literature, see Stephen Leacock, *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (Toronto: The Cromwell Publishing Company, 1914). Veblen’s presence at the University of Chicago attracted Leacock, one of Canada’s most famous humourists, to take his doctorate there in 1903.

463 The best collection of essays considering the gendering of consumption is Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

464 Macías-González, “The Mexican Aristocracy,” 116-141.

The press accounts of the event reflect this gendering of consumption. Although husbands undoubtedly accompanied wives and fathers daughters, when it came to reporting the effects of the tour the guests consisted of “a great number of ladies and misses” freely roaming through the departments assisted by “a veritable army of personnel” of both sexes.

“Elegant ladies” received much attention as they naturally became “seduced by the value and elegance of the . . . articles,” illuminated and displayed so professionally in their glass cases.

The only male references belonged to Díaz who, accompanied by the president of the corporation, José de Teresa y Miranda, “appeared enchanted on his stroll through the store.”

The celebrants continued until 8 o’clock after dispensing with the charity cases. They interwove their necessary first purchases with a champagne-lunch and a tour of the store. In commercialized rituals of rule, an act of consumption necessarily accompanied the symbolic representations of a modern, hierarchical society.

This inauguration, expressing the degree to which department stores stocked Porfirian ideals and dreams of national progress, was far from an isolated event. Similar celebrations marked the renovations and expansions of existing establishments as well as the entrance of new stores into the commercial fray. In May of 1907 no less than six department stores had recently inaugurated or were soon to inaugurate new or extensively expanded and redesigned buildings. By this time the city of barely 400,000 possessed nine true, purpose-built department stores and at least fourteen other major dry goods stores organized on the department store principle in which distinct sections sold clothing, accessories, home furnishings and other goods. [465](#) This business development extended throughout the major

465 The department stores were: Palacio de Hierro; Puerto de Veracruz; Ciudad de Londres; Puerto de Liverpool; Francia Maritima; Centro Mercantil/La Valenciana; Las Fábricas Universales; La Reforma de Comercio; La Sorpresa y Primavera Unidas. Other stores, such as El Importador, would follow before the 179

cities of the Republic including Guanajuato, San Luís de Potosí, Puebla, Monterrey, Chihuahua, and Guadalajara where the October 1899 inauguration of the newly renovated Fábricas de Francia prompted one commentator to sniff “It is unnecessary to state that the interior is appointed luxuriously and in the style of the great stores of Paris.” [466](#) In the capital, Díaz’s wife—Carmen Romero Rubio de Díaz—seemed to grace any important inauguration missed by her husband. In May of 1903 El Paje, the new *almacén de novedades* on the corner of Plateros and Empedradillo on the Zócalo proudly announced that Carmelita was their first customer. Not long before she had enjoyed guest-of-honour status at the inauguration of the high-end jewelry store La Perla for whose ceremony the owners (the Diener brothers) sent out nearly 2000 invitations. [467](#) The mixture of high society and high politics appeared unfailingly to characterize these historical events. New buildings, new business technologies, and new shopping venues provided Díaz with both the opportunity and forum to announce the realization of his regime’s development programs. Typical statements ran along the lines of his praise heaped on the newly located Boker hardware and furniture store: “[Casa Boker] is one of the best ornaments of the capital and a demonstration of its culture.” [468](#)

Modernizing Attributes

In the flourishing consumer culture of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mexico City the department store stood out as a modernizing institution *par excellence*.

Mexican Revolution began. German department stores emphasizing hardware but also incorporating to some degree product lines such as clothing and toys include Casa Boker, Ciudad de Hamburgo, and Korff-Honsberg.

466 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Oct. 15, 1899, 3.

467 For opening of El Paje, see *El Mundo Ilustrado*, May 16, 1903, 14. La Perla information resides in *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 13, 1903, 3; and *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Jan. 18, 1903, 3.

468 *El Imparcial*, July 4, 1900, 1.

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Nearly every aspect of these stores, from their origins to their ownership and their advertising reinforced this impression.

Department stores were not a Mexican creation. Their association with the metropolitan centres of Europe and North America enhanced their appeal to the modernizing mindset of Mexican society. The first department store appeared in either New York or Paris, depending on the historical account.

[469](#) A. T. Stewart has a claim on the earliest store with his New York

“Marble Palace” in 1846 and his “Cast Iron Palace” in 1862. [470](#) In Paris, Aristide Boucicault began construction of the Bon Marché in 1869, but his institution proved far more enduring and truer to the marketing and display model that we know today.

Boucicault constructed not only purpose-built store but also a business model that emphasized retail over wholesale (which made up 90% of Stewart’s business), an expansive line of products, and emphasized store atmosphere, display and novelty in addition to adopting increasingly accepted retail policies such as free entry, returns, mail-order, and fixed pricing. [471](#) Cumulatively, these practices unfettered the potential of a low-profit margin, high-volume business model that had simultaneously emerged in the draper’s shops of the English Midlands and the *magasins de nouveautés* of Paris in the 1830s. [472](#)

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s in Paris and the United States stores either established or transformed themselves into department stores, whether the Louvre or Le Printemps in France or Macy’s, Wanamakers, Lord & Taylor, and Marshall Field’s across the Atlantic.

[469](#) Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 1-5, clearly defines terms and historiography. John Benson and Gareth Shaw, eds., *The Evolution of Retail Systems, c.1800-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992) offers a more economic and quantitative history of retail development in Germany, Britain, and Canada that thoughtfully analyzes the different development patterns of department stores in those countries with necessary reference to the United States and France.

[470](#) Miller, *Bon Marché*, 29.

[471](#) *Ibid.*, 21-27.

[472](#) For an account of the *magasins de nouveautés* see Miller, *Bon Marché*, 25-28; on the English drapers, consult Lancaster, *The Department Store*, 7-15.

The point is that department stores were a transnational phenomenon, appearing first in leading centres of cultural modernity—though not necessarily industrial centres—before establishing outposts around the globe. [473](#) The vast interior space of these buildings, [474](#) their attention to visual appeal, and policies that made transactions more time-efficient and less stressful transformed shopping into a refined leisure activity and carved out a new, private social space for the ascendant class of the age: the bourgeoisie.

Department stores celebrated and memorialized the transnational ascendancy of bourgeois culture which in Mexico equated with the *gente decente* social class. This class was as much a cultural as an economic category that represented a particular way of looking at the world. In Mexico, this worldview manifested itself in the ongoing development or modernization program that embodied the *gente decente* values of “thrift, sobriety, hygiene, and punctuality.” [475](#) These values served to create the “Peaceful and Working People”

required for a capitalist economy and society to function.

But *gente decente* values were marshalled for more efficient and regimented consumption as well as production activities. Respectable society glorified the material abundance produced by the factories and other production techniques elevated by its hard work and technological prowess. Efficient and widespread access to mass consumption complemented the production dynamic. At the same time, goods serve to distinguish an individual socially and culturally. Thus the increased production delivered by the capitalist [473](#) Too often economic modernization and the concept of “modernity” is based upon industrialization. Whitney Walton uncouples modernity from industrialization as she considers how France achieved a leading global role

in taste and fashion precisely from its emphasis on handcrafted and specialized products (with increasing machine inputs as technologies improved) in contrast to standardized mass industrialized manufacture. See Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

474 The Bon Marché, upon completion in 1887, covered almost 500,000 square feet between its main building and annex across the street.

475 French, *Peaceful and Working People*, 63.

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economy and culture of the bourgeoisie fulfilled a demand for goods resulting from a centuries-long trend in western culture in which goods and the act of consumption became increasingly important repositories of cultural meaning. [476](#) Importantly, one central goal of bourgeois society was improvement, often measured by manners and morals but equally by the material culture with which one surrounded herself. Consumption not only aided economic progress but also expressed tangible evidence of improvement for the individual, the family, the nation, and humankind in general.

Department stores, therefore, were the ideal institution to further this logic. They appeared to mark the apex not only of modern retailing but also modern living as they brought together new building technologies, recent display innovations, evolving retail models, and a transformation of shopping into a leisure activity. Michael Miller best described the link between institution and social class in his study of the Bon Marché in Paris:

In its architecture it brought together the culture's commitment to functionalize its environment and the culture's irrepressible need to secure solidity and respectability for its works. In its values it flaunted the culture's identification with appearances and material possessions, reaffirmed the culture's dedication to productivity, personified the culture's pretensions to an egalitarian society. The department store was the bourgeoisie's world.

[477](#)

Furthering the development and success of the department store and a broader urban culture of consumption were demographic trends toward urbanization, state policies of urban renewal favouring commercial development, an economic pattern that steadily raised urban 476 For a compelling historical anthropological view on the increasing importance of goods and their meaning in Western society, see Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). The classic text on consumption, goods, history, and meaning remains the multidisciplinary compilation of John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993). An important monograph representing a movement to place consumerism and the heightened cultural significance of goods long before the advent Industrial Revolution is Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996).

477 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 3.

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wages as well as increased the number of those reliant upon wage labour, and social and cultural investments in goods and the pursuit of those goods.

After Stewart and Boucicault department stores appeared in Europe and the Americas at surprisingly uneven rates. After early innovations in retailing practices and product diversification English merchants eschewed many of the display techniques and specialized buildings adopted across the Channel and the Atlantic. London did not break this stodgy reputation until the 1909 appearance of Selfridge's which unabashedly copied American construction and display models. ⁴⁷⁸ In Germany, the growth of this institution was equally slow. A high tax on large retailers designed to protect artisans and small shopkeepers had much to do with this. No department stores appeared before 1890. ⁴⁷⁹ Across the Atlantic, Canadian retailers experimented early with the department store concept and more closely followed their American cousins than their recent colonial masters in Britain. Timothy Eaton moved his Toronto business into a four-storey building in 1883 and by 1890 Eaton's employed over 400 clerks in a store that covered a whole city block. Robert Simpson opened his Toronto store in 1894 and by 1910 department stores reached from Montreal in the East to Calgary in the West. ⁴⁸⁰ South America lagged behind. The Chilean capital of Santiago waited until 1910 to unveil its first true department store, Gath y Chaves. ⁴⁸¹ In the "Paris of the Pampas," Buenos Aires, despite a much larger market and excruciating attention to European fashions and consumerism the establishment of a true department store did not ⁴⁷⁸ Benson and Shaw, eds., *Evolution of Retail Systems*, 141.

⁴⁷⁹ Benson and Shaw, eds., *Evolution of Retail Systems*, 174. Also, Warren G. Breckman, "Disciplining Consumption: The Debate about Luxury in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1914," *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 485-505, notes the beginning of department stores in Germany during the 1890s.

⁴⁸⁰ Information on Canada comes from Benson and Shaw, eds. *Evolution of Retail Systems*, 190-191. For more on Canadian department store origins see James Bryant, *Department Store Disease* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

⁴⁸¹ Arnold J. Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America's Material Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 156.

occur until Gath y Chaves opened in 1910 followed by Harrod's in 1913. [482](#) Brazil also did not see its first department store until after the turn of the century. [483](#) In this chronological context, Mexicans with their first department store in 1891 and five before 1900 were indeed

“civilized consumers” on the cutting edge of Western cultural progress.

Ownership and Organization

Mexico's advanced status in global retailing owes a great deal to the ownership of these stores. Such thoroughly French names such as Tron, Ebrard, Proal, Ollivier, Reynaud, Signoret, Donnadieu, and Robert instantly brought the cultural cachet of France to the institution in Mexico. Keep in mind that at the end of the nineteenth century Paris was the uncontested consumer capital of the world in terms of dictates of good taste generally and feminine fashion specifically. ⁴⁸⁴ Store names reveal the French—or at least Latinate—

influence in their fanciful or descriptive qualities: the Iron Palace, the Importer, the Port of Veracruz, The Surprise, and The New World. A parallel may be drawn with the whimsical appellations of Mexico's favourite popular drinking holes, the *pulquerías*, which so 482 James R. Scobie, one of the greatest urban historians of Latin America, provides an example of how recent is the interest in connecting department stores, shopping and consumerism with urban development and modernity. He mentions only once in passing the Gath y Chaves department store in his *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870- 1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 34.

483 Surprisingly, Jeffrey Needell does not even mention department stores among his description of shopping habits and haunts in his path-breaking *A Tropical Belle Epoque: Elite Culture and Society in Turn-of-the-Century Rio de Janeiro* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

484 Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially pages 7-8. Also Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace*. At the same time that France held global leadership in many categories of taste and in feminine fashion, London firmly retained its position as the source of masculine fashion. David Kuchta makes a compelling argument for how this gendered polarization of fashion along national lines came to be in

“The Making of the Self-Made Man: Class, Clothing, and English Masculinity, 1688-1832,” in de Grazia, *Sex of Things*, 54-78. Kuchta’s work offers a refreshing reminder that gender history is not just about women but rather the construction of masculinity and femininity.

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fascinated contemporary travel writers as well as several of today’s historians. [485](#) This contrasts with the Anglo-American influence in South American stores exhibited by their adoption of names of company proprietors such as Gath y Chavez and Harrod’s.

These owners came from a single region in France—the Barcelonnette—and by the Porfiriato this community controlled the national garment and fashion trade. As *Modern Mexico* magazine state in 1901, “the dry goods trade of this country is almost exclusively in the hands of the French merchants.” [486](#) Barcelonnettes established 8 of the 9 Porfirian department stores and owned all of them after Sebastian Robert (founder of La Valenciana) bought out the shareholders of the Centro Mercantil in 1901. [487](#)

Business organization of the department stores weighted heavily towards the partnership model. This stemmed partly as a function of Mexican commercial law and partly that of preference among the Barcelonnette community to spread both the risks and benefits of their ventures. Still, two firms eventually adopted the new organizational form of the joint stock company (the *Sociedad Anónima*, or S.A.): the Palacio de Hierro in 1898 became the first retailer in the Republic to do so, followed by the Puerto de Liverpool in 1907. Both companies were listed not only on the Mexican stock market—the *bolsa*—but also on the prestigious Paris *bourse*.

485 Pablo Piccato, “‘El Paso de Venus por el disco del Sol’: Criminality and Alcoholism in the Late Porfiriato,”

Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos 11, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 203-241.

486 *Modern Mexico*, Feb. 1901, 10.

487 A caveat is in order here. I am defining department stores as those whose interior space is distinctly compartmentalized and which carry diverse lines of merchandise with an emphasis on clothing, fashions, and accessories. Porfirian department stores actually carried much more than this, including a wide range of home furnishings and services as well as luxury objects, toys, and a variety of other non-textile goods. Jurgen Buchenau and his work on the Casa Boker makes the compelling argument that the Boker store of 1900 was

“the first department store that did not sell textiles.” Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 64. The Germans dominated the hardware business in Mexico much as the Barcelonnettes controlled textiles and fashion, and certain of their stores such as Korff y Honsberg sold not only hardware but toys and garments as well. Nevertheless, for this study, while the German stores were technically department stores, only the French stores which more closely resemble the transnational model were called *los grandes almacenes* by residents and visitors alike.

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The Barcelonnette Emigration and Early Decades

Commercial partnerships were indications of the extremely close-knit social and business community forged by the Barcelonnettes in Mexico. In many respects, their financial and cultural support network resembled those of other commercial emigrant communities across the globe such as the Chinese (in Thailand and many other nations) and sub-continent Indians (in

Fiji, the West Indies, and elsewhere). Barcelonnettes did not come to Mexico with the intent of assimilating into the host society. Rather, the immigration culture promoted the ideal of Barcelonnette solidarity, working hard, making a fortune, and returning home to marry and retire in a state of financially secure bourgeois respectability.

Marriage—particularly to a Mexican woman—was frowned upon. [488](#) Barcelonnette immigrants carried with them not only their social class perceptions—most were from the middling classes—but also racial prejudices. Achieving personal enrichment and furthering the European *mission civilisatrice* merged in the Barcelonnette community. They were, as Jurgen Buchenau aptly labeled participants in this process, “trade conquistadors.” [489](#)

The Barcelonnettes came from an isolated valley in southeastern France with a population of less than 18,000. Nestled—or imprisoned—in the Basse-Alpes bordering Italy, the Barcelonnette region refers to the Ubaye valley in which over half the population lives in the town of Barcelonnette. The town provides the name for the larger administrative *arrondissement* and the people from the region. The valley possessed a long tradition of economic migration that facilitated this emigration to Mexico. Historically, men would leave the valley before the winter snows came in order to peddle the products of their domestic woolens industry throughout southern France. As French industry and transportation systems [488](#) For a concise synopsis of the Barcelonnette social and economic system, see Gouy, *Pérégrinations*, 12, 59.

[489](#) Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 64.

expanded they increased their range and expanded their product line to include textiles of other regions, particularly those of the nearby textile center of Lyon. [490](#) Migration to Mexico therefore marked a simple

extension of the *colporteur* tradition for residents of this economically disadvantaged valley.

The Barcelonnette involvement in the Mexican retail trade long preceded the department stores. The first Barcelonnette store in Mexico opened in 1819 or 1820. Not surprisingly, given the fashion reputation of the French and their regional economic traditions the first Barcelonnettes moved most heavily into the textile and garment sector.

The three Arnaud brothers, Jacques, Dominique, and Marc-Antoine opened the *Cajon de Ropa de las Siete Puertas*. Even after Jacques was brutally murdered, disembowelled, and robbed of \$35,000 *en route* to Veracruz the remaining brothers hung on, prospered, and eventually sent home for help. ⁴⁹¹ Three former employees arrived who would later set up their own store, *El Gran Oriental*, in 1838 under the Portal de las Flores on the Zócalo. The pace of immigration quickened after flooding at home in 1843 pushed young men to seek their fortunes in Mexico, a career option that became more attractive after two of the Gran Oriental owners returned home two years later with 200,000 francs each. Young Barcelonnette men and a few women swelled the community in Mexico, with almost 70

arriving in 1849 and 1850. Barcelonnettes owned 44 businesses in Mexico by 1848

490 Gouy, *Pérégrinations*, 23-36.

491 The Arnaud brothers have played a central role in the history/myth of the Barcelonnettes in Mexico. Only one recent history has pieced together an account of the brothers based on family papers and other archival sources. This work has placed the brothers in Mexico before rather than after Independence as well as revealing that their point of origin was Louisiana where the Arnaud and other Barcelonnette families had set up farming colonies during the first decade of the nineteenth century. See Pierre Coste, “Jacques Arnaud, ses frères et ses descendants” in Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 100-112.

including nine clothing stores in Mexico City, Puebla, Zacatecas, Guadalajara, and Toluca.

Still, between 1845 and 1852 they made up only 7.5% of French emigration to Mexico. [492](#)

The following decades saw the numbers of Barcelonnettes expand to the point that Mexicans came to use the name “Barcelonnette” to label all French. For at least the last two decades of the Porfiriato they made up 80% of the French community, counting for 4800 of 6000 French living in Mexico in 1910. By 1867 they ran 27 clothing stores in the Capital and at the time of the Revolution possessed a network of 214 firms trading in 31 cities and 23

states of the Republic before the Revolution. While they ventured into a number of business fields they specialized in retailing and producing textile and articles of fashion. As the new century began, 80% of Barcelonnette immigrants worked in garment stores. [493](#) So associated were the Barcelonnette with the textile retail trade that a stock Mexican stereotype of the Frenchman was “Vende mucha manta y hace buena cocina [He sell a lot of cloth and cooks well].” [494](#) The Mexican nickname for the French was “calicot” for the low-priced printed cotton cloth of which the Barcelonnette-owned garment stores sold so much. [495](#)

The Barcelonnettes adapted to the Mexican market at the same time as they brought with them new ideas of retailing. The retention of transatlantic ties ensured that subsequent successful strategies in Paris often found their way to Mexico. The early Barcelonnette retail model of low price and high turnover allowed merchants to prosper and the community to expand slowly through the 1850s. These first stores, called the traditional *cajones de ropa*,

would gradually give way to the larger and fancier *almacenes de novedades* and eventually the *grandes almacenes* (department stores). While competitors charged that they sold 492 Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 8, 20-21.

493 Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 81.

494 Antiq-Auvaro, *Emigration des Barcelonnettes*, 34.

495 Luis Nicolau d'Olwer, et al, *El Porfiriato: La vida económica*, vol. 8 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed.

Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 785.

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commensurately low quality goods, the Barcelonnettes were implementing the beginning a business model of high-volume sales on lower profit margins with origins in Western Europe that would revolutionize retailing and result in the department store.

Despite these early inroads into the Mexican market the economic position of the Barcelonnette community remained far from secure. Mexican and Spanish retailers controlled much of the retail garment trade through mid-century and offered stiff competition. Furthermore, Barcelonnette and other French merchants remained captive to German and, to a lesser extent, British wholesalers whose compatriots controlled commercial credit and transatlantic transportation. [496](#)

From the 1860s onward, domestic and international developments and the deft capitalization of the Barcelonnette community on these events paved the way for French domination of the dry goods trade in Mexico. The stranglehold of German and British wholesalers began to weaken in 1863

when French retailers in Mexico took advantage of Napoleon's Intervention and succeeded in establishing a French-owned steamship route directly from Saint-Nazaire to Veracruz. Seven years later the eruption of the Franco-Prussian War would prove disastrous for the French nation but allowed the French merchant community in Mexico to finally declare its independence from German middlemen. With the onset of war, French merchants boycotted the German wholesalers and a number of Barcelonnettes returned home and used their wealth to open export houses in France that extended generous credit in order to fill the vacuum. As a consequence, 80 German import houses went bankrupt and the last German textile import house in Mexico liquidated in 1892. ⁴⁹⁷ Further assisting this consolidation of French preeminence was the 1880 diplomatic ⁴⁹⁶ Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette*, 406.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 406; Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 33-35; Gouy, *Pérégrinations*, 54-58.

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reconciliation between France and Mexico. ⁴⁹⁸ In addition, the rise a decade later of the *Científico* faction in the Porfirian government signalled a shift towards a European counterbalance to growing concerns of American influence in Mexico. José Yves Limantour, the Finance Minister and most prominent member of the *Científicos*, enjoyed a close relationship with the Barcelonnettes. A dramatic example of this comes in 1903 when Émile Meyran, a Barcelonnette director of the Centro Mercantil, returned from his native valley and presented Limantour with a live eagle from his home town of St. Ours. ⁴⁹⁹

Department Store Product Sourcing

One of the greatest misconceptions of Porfirian department stores is that imported goods lined their shelves and filled their displays. These stores, often perceived as institutions of the elite, were believed to retard national development by promoting the consumption of imports and limiting the growth of a domestic market for national industry.

This fit within the economic model of Mexico as a colonial export-oriented economy controlled by foreigners and elites who had no interest in developing internal industries or markets. ⁵⁰⁰ Recent works by Mexican economic historians such as Aurora Gómez and Sandra Kuntz Ficker have provided convincing evidence that a domestic market and national ⁴⁹⁸ Lucía de Robina, *Reconciliación de México y Francia (1870-1880)* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1963). Pages 36 and 37 specifically describe the resumption of relations on December 2, 1880 after 18 years of official diplomatic silence.

⁴⁹⁹ Emilio Meyran to José Yves Limantour, Mexico City, December 17, 1903, CDLIV 1903 Roll 22, Carp. 22, Archivo José Yves Limantour, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México CONDUMEX, Chimalistac, Mexico City. Hereafter cited as JYL-CONDUMEX. Meyran, writing on Centro Mercantil letterhead, described the eagle “as a testament of respect and true affection.”

⁵⁰⁰ The classic English-language text on the role of the railroad in this process is John H. Coatsworth, *Growth against Development: The Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981). For the best summary of this view of the Mexican economy see Benjamin Orlove and Arnold J. Bauer, “Giving Importance to Imports,” in *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America*, eds. Benjamin Orlove and Arnold J. Bauer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 1-30.

industry did expand steadily during much of the Porfiriato. ⁵⁰¹ American economic historian Edward Beatty has also demonstrated federal support for the growth of national industries and markets in his analysis of Porfirian economic policies such as import tariffs. ⁵⁰² My own research from a retail approach supports these revisions at least in textile manufacturing and selling.

In fact, the progressive reputation of the Barcelonnettes rested on the modernization not only of Mexican retailing but also manufacturing. Barcelonnette textile factories produced many of the clothing items sold by their stores. The movement of the Barcelonnette community into textile production strengthened their retail position. Indeed, it would eventually spur its expansion. This vertical integration of textile production and retailing marked a distinct innovation from French retailers such as the Bon Marché whose direct involvement in production went no further than certain items in high demand manufactured in house or in the neighbouring annex building. ⁵⁰³ In Mexico, Barcelonnette investors had staked a presence in this sector by the mid-nineteenth century, the first Barcelonnette textile mill opening in Puebla in 1831. ⁵⁰⁴ The American Civil War proved a windfall for the community. They made hefty profits by filling the demand for troop uniforms and wisely modernized their factories. In doing so they transformed an industry whose longstanding importance in the Mexican economy was matched by its horrendous inefficiencies. The Pax Porfiriana set the stage for the next round of Barcelonnette expansion and in the 1880s they established new textile factories and purchased existing ones. ⁵⁰⁵ Sandra Kuntz Ficker, *Empresa extranjera y mercado interno: El Ferrocarril Central Mexicano 1880-1907*

(Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 1995); and Freer, “The Impact of Revolution.” For an overview of the new economic historiography in Mexico, see Freer, “Industrialización, empresas y trabajadores industriales.”

⁵⁰² Edward Beatty, *Institutions and Investment. The Political Basis of Industrialization in Mexico before 1911*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

503 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 57-58.

504 Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 20.

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notable was the formation of CIDOSA (La Compañía Industrial de Orizaba, S.A.), which incorporated a number of textile factories. It included Río Blanco, the largest and most modern facility in the country constructed in 1892 and the scene of arguably the largest, bloodiest, and most iconic labour conflict of the Porfiriato. CIVSA (La Compañía Industrial Veracruzana, S.A.) formed in 1896 and began operations at its flagship Santa Rosa factory in 1898. [505](#) The Barcelonnettes also branched into hydroelectric power plants to feed the energy needs of the factories and often neighbouring population centres. Two notable examples of this energy generation are the Rincón Grande plant paired with CIDOSA and San Ildefonso with the woolens factory of the same name.

These and other textile factories deployed modern machinery and production techniques that required a mass consumer market to absorb these goods. Not surprisingly, the owners of four of the five department stores built before 1900 happened to be founding members of CIDOSA. [506](#) Another group of influential Barcelonnette retailers shut out of this investment were the money behind the subsequent CIVSA. [507](#) In fact, many department stores advertised on their exterior façade the names of domestic factories which supplied them. Sebastian Robert's La Valenciana, located under the Portal de las Flores, announced in large letters above its second floor "Productos de las Fábricas de Santa Rosa y La 505 See Proal and Charpenel, *Barcelonnettes en México*, 28-34, for a French vision of the Mexican textile industry. For a good overview of the Mexican textile industry consult Keremitsis, *Industria Textil Mexicana*.

506 Proal and Charpenel, *Barcelonnettes en México*, 28-29. These were Joseph Tron y Cia. (Palacio de Hierro), J. B. Ebrard y Cia. (Puerto de Liverpool), J. Ollivier (Ciudad de Londres), Signoret y Honnorat (Puerto de Veracruz), and M. Lambert y Cia. (El Correo Francés). Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 44, lists the ownership and its percentage of the shares owned. It contradicts the assertion that CIVSA formed out of Barcelonnettes excluded from CIDOSA. After Ollivier, Tron, and Ebrard, the largest shareholder was A.

Richaud (El Nuevo Mundo, La Reforma de Comercio). A. Reynaud (Fábricas Universales) was the sixth largest shareholder, Sebastián Robert (La Valenciana/El Centro Mercantil) was seventh, M. Lambert (El Correo Frances) was eighth, and M. Bellon (El Progreso) was ninth.

507 Proal and Charpenel, *Barcelonnettes en México*, 33-34. CIVSA founders included the owners of Fábricas Universales, La Valenciana/El Centro Mercantil, La Reforma de Comercio, El Nuevo Mundo and large *almacenes de novedades* like El Progreso. For information on the division between the two Barcelonnette business groups see Jean Meyer, “Les Français au Mexique au XIXème siècle,” *Cahiers des Amériques Latines* 9-10 (1974): 62-64.

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Hormiga.” [508](#) The Centro Mercantil likewise ran banners on its façade advertising its imports as well as “wools and cottons from the principal factories of the country.” [509](#) Francia Maritima acted as an outlet for the woolens produced by Santa Teresa and the cottons of La Magdalena. [510](#) The Cajon de Sol of Denis Ollivier paired with the Rio Hondo mill to such an extent that the bankruptcy of the store in 1901 led to the sale of the factory. [511](#)

Palacio de Hierro archives illuminated this domestic sourcing of goods that spanned a wide variety of materials (cashmere, cotton, wool) and classes.

The company contracted with a variety of mills including La Magdalena, Miraflores, San Lorenzo, La Minerva, Rio Hondo, La Carolina, and San Ildefonso among others. The common Barcelonnette strategy of joint mill ownership bears out in the familiar practice of those factories supplying the stores owned by investors, sometimes exclusively. La Magdalena, for example, produced primarily for the eight Barcelonnette business partnerships that owned it. ⁵¹² While Barcelonnettes did not own all the textile factories in Mexico, they did use their retailing clout to forge exclusive contracts with producers that prohibited sales to retail competitors.

One such contract was that made by eight leading retailers with the Watson Phillips Company, owner of La Minerva, for 7000 pieces of *manta*—coarse cotton cloth—in three different classes ranging from \$3.37 to \$7.75. The contract concluded “You are obligated 508 See the store façade illustrated in Sebastián Robert to Ayuntamiento, December 10, 1901, Portales 1559-1918 Tomo I, Archivos de ex-Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México (hereafter cited as the AACM). Robert’s store, La Valenciana, had burned down and his subsequent battle with the city over its replacement proved a catalyst to his purchase of El Centro Mercantil. He nevertheless rebuilt on the same site after winning over the Council with a little help from his friend, José Yves Limantour.

509 See, for example, the photo of the Centro in Proal and Charpenel, *Empire des Barcelonnettes*, 39.

510 *Le Mexique*, June 20, 1907, 151.

511 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Apr. 16, 1901, 2.

512 J. Tron y Cia. contract with Bermejillo y Cia. [“Cia.” is the abbreviation for “Compañía”], no date [likely sometime in 1890], pages 11-12, Copiador I (1889-1903), Archivo Palacio de Hierro, Mexico City (hereafter cited as APH). The contract is with the mill “La Magdalena” which the contract states is owned by Tron, J. B.

Ebrard, J. Ollivier, Signoret Honnorat, Richaud, Aubert y Cia, Lambert Reynaud Cia, and Garcin Faudon y Cia.

not to sell Miraflores manta to any other buyers who may present themselves.” [513](#)

Barcelonnettes also used their economic position and social clout to push for favourable tariff policies such as dropping the tax on raw cotton that reflected their textile investments. [514](#)

Palacio archives detail the extent to which store directors owned shares in various textile factories such as CIDOSA as well as other Porfirian businesses. [515](#) The achievements of domestic textile manufacturers to expand the domestic market at the expense of imports received regular adulation in the business and general press. [516](#) In 1900 Limantour wrote to Swiss/French financier Eduard Noetzlin on this subject: “. . . the brilliant success achieved by the cotton textile factories established or developed in the years between 1895 and 1898 is undoubtedly owed to the skill of the owners of the retail clothing stores [*tiendas de ropa al menudeo*] who understood very well the advantages that could come from the union, under the same hands, of the manufacturing sites with the establishments that have achieved a *de facto* monopoly on retail sales [*ventas al pormenor*].” [517](#)

This information contradicts any assumption of department stores and other dry goods retailers in the central commercial zone as exclusive purveyors of imported goods.

Instead, the evidence demonstrates that these retail establishments were outlets for the 513 Ollivier y Cia., J. Tron y Cia, J. B. Ebrard y Cia., Richaud Aubert y Cia, Signoret Honnorat y Cia., Lambert Reynaud y Cia., Garcin Faudon Cia., and S. Robert y Cia. to Sres. Watson Phillips y Cia. Sucs, Jan. 28, 1891, page 16, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

514 *Echo du Mexique*, Jan. 15, 1897, 1.

515 For example, J. Tron y Cia. to Cia. Industrial de Orizaba, Sept. 6, 1894, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH. In this entry the Palacio informs CIDOSA that it has received 65 shares worth \$65,000 corresponding to an increase in CIDOSA's capitalization and had received another 30 for Julio Tron. In another letter to CIDOSA on February 11, 1895 (page 74, Copiador I) the Palacio acknowledges receipt of \$36,400 for its 1894 dividend based on the 4,550 shares owned by J. Tron y Cia and \$2,400 corresponding to the 8% dividend paid on the 300

personal shares of Julio Tron. As for ownership in other textile mills, see J. Tron y Cia. to Ernest Pugibet, Feb.

4, 1898, page 167, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH, for the additional purchase of 1000 shares in the San Ildefonso Mill (wool products). A later example is the letter from Henri Tron to the textile mill La Perfeccionada, S.A., Dec. 31, 1904, Mexico City, page 108, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH, as a dividend payment to Tron for his personal investment of \$50,000 in the company.

516 In the French press consult *Le Courrier du Mexique*, May 12, 1890, 4; and *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 17, 1903, 2.

517 JYL to Eduardo Noetzlin, Mexico City, Sept. 22, 1900, CDLIV 1900, Roll 1, Carp. 1, JYL-CONDUMEX.

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increased capacity and diversity achieved by the domestic textile industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Department stores shelves stocked a mix of goods produced domestically and imported from a variety of nations.

The enduring success of French Barcelonnette department stores appears counterintuitive for those familiar with Porfirian macroeconomics and

import statistics which state that French imports to Mexico slid precipitously during the last two decades of the Porfiriato. The nation fell from second place among importers to a distant fourth behind the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. ⁵¹⁸ French commercial commentators criticized their compatriot manufacturers in France for their complacency in Mexico and around the globe. They blamed producers for relying solely on the cultural cachet of French goods to sell their products instead of advertising heavily and supporting a network of commercial agents and travelling salesmen to promote their goods as the Americans, British, and Germans had. Furthermore, the French did not—and haughtily would not—adapt to the tastes and economics of their overseas markets, a strategy that the Germans had used to great success in capturing market share. ⁵¹⁹ In the late-nineteenth century context of economic and territorial colonialism national pride conspicuously infused this struggle over foreign markets. ⁵²⁰ Battle imagery coloured the language of global trade, metaphors which eventually translated into reality in 1914.

518 See Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 42-46. For France as the fourth largest importer, see *Le Mexique*, July 20, 1902, 1.

519 F. Bianconi, *Le Mexique à la portée des industriels, des capitalistes, des negociants importateurs et des travailleurs* (Paris: Imprimerie Chaix, 1899), 115. Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 139, discusses the concern within the Parisian Press for the failing of French business in the marketplace.

520 The various presses and commentators for each foreign community constructed a narrative of international trade warfare taking place on Mexican soil. They bemoaned the weaknesses of their commercial “troops” and fretted that market share would be lost to other competitors. The French press in 1892 talked of a “Commercial Conquest” as it berated the American control of transportation and the favouritism shown to American business (*L’Echo du Mexique*, Sept. 9, 1892, 1). French commercial commentators such as F. Bianconi worried over 196

What explains this contradictory development of a shrinking French import presence and an ascendant French merchant class in Mexico? Pat assumptions of national identity, loyalty and actions need re-examination. The obvious answer to this dilemma is that the Barcelonnette cart was not attached to the French manufacturing horse. French merchant communities did not live or die on the sale of French goods alone. As described above, the linkage between Barcelonnette-owned manufacturing facilities and retail outlets in Mexico illustrates a primary reason for the success of the community in the face of shrinking markets for products from the mother country. A second crucial reason is that Barcelonnette retailers not only sold domestically produced goods but also those imported from other Great Powers.

A brisk transatlantic trade continued with English, German, Belgian, Swiss and other suppliers while American goods entered through the seaports of Veracruz and Tampico as well as via the rail lines of the Mexican Central and the Mexican National. [521](#) For the Barcelonnettes, business reality outweighed national loyalty. Moreover, unlike French manufacturers, Barcelonnette merchants transplanted traditional economic patterns into Mexico and established a network of Barcelonnette travelling salesmen—four times larger than that in France—to fill in the gaps of the brick-and-mortar latticework they were carefully constructing throughout the Republic. [522](#)

In retrospect, the Barcelonnette did not act French at all. Most of the time they even distanced themselves from the rest of the French community and reserved jobs for residents

“our risking the total abandonment to our competitors a market of nearly 11 million souls” (F. Bianconi, *Le Mexique*, 115) while Gaston Routier described the Mexican market as an international battleground on which France must vanquish the British and Germans. Gaston Routier, *Le Mexique* (Paris: Lille Imp. L. Danel, 1891), 89-80.

521 Arthur W. Fergusson, *Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the American Republics, 1891), 137. The Barcelonnettes were not the only

merchants who diversified their imported product sources. See Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 48, for the origins of goods sold by German-owned Casa Boker.

522 Gouy, *Pérégrinations*, 10.

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of the valley to the exclusion of those from other regions of France. [523](#) Why? Because to a large degree they were not French. A French national identity was far from complete in the nineteenth century. Among the Barcelonnette it was a recent and imperfect development and during the Porfiriato Barcelonnettes considered themselves Barcelonnette first and French second. Indeed, French national identity came particularly late to the Barcelonnette region and southern France in general. Until transportation and communication advances extended centralizing influences, control, and culture, the national government and Parisian society considered the whole South as a savage and backward land. [524](#) This resilience of local identities in France explains the insularity of the Barcelonnette community in Mexico while it pragmatically took advantage of the benefits and protections offered by French citizenship.

Store Finances and Banking Function

The remarkable stability and financial success of Porfirian department stores and other Barcelonnette fashion stores (the *almacenes de novedades*) furthered their image as institutions of progress. The expansion projects and sheer numbers of Mexico City department stores suggest that the prosperity of the Palacio was not an isolated case. This conflicts with the current trend among many American economic historians of Mexico headed by Stephen Haber who have made blanket statements on the unprofitability and overcapacity of Porfirian businesses and the scarce purchasing power of consumers. [525](#)

523 An account of a Frenchman turned away from a Barcelonnette business because he was not from valley appears in *La Voz de México*, Mar. 6, 1891, 2.

524 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 3-22.

525 Stephen H. Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). For the latest criticism of Haber and information on a growing body of regional and industry-specific economic history demonstrating the problems with his over-generalized analysis, see Freer, “Industrialización, empresas y trabajadores industriales.”

Palacio de Hierro account books state that in 1896, two years before incorporation, 12

shareholders in the company (all French) shared \$330,000 of the \$520,000 in net profits earned that year. [526](#) The rest of the earnings were plowed back into company reserves.

Earnings on the sale of merchandise had risen to \$672,000 in 1899, [527](#) \$751,000 in 1901, [528](#)

\$833,000 in 1902, [529](#) \$1,000,000 in 1905, [530](#) and \$1,200,000 in 1907 [531](#)—the first year of the brutal depression and the last year of information available in surviving company books.

More impressive is that the market could support the expansion to full department store status not only of the Palacio but also the Puerto de Veracruz in 1894, the Puerto de Liverpool in 1898, and the Centro Mercantil in 1899 and the Correo Frances by the turn of the century. [532](#) Investors, regardless of political philosophy, do not continue to sink money into losing propositions. Nor do companies expand repeatedly in such an environment. The balance sheets of the Palacio de Hierro reveal the lucrative potential of Porfirian merchandise retailing much as the net profits and dividends shared by the Buen Tono cigarette factory show the profitability in the tobacco manufacturing sector.

Bankruptcies among Barcelonnette establishments were unusual. A spokesman for the North American Manufacturer's Association informed *Modern Mexico* magazine in 1897

that "Mexican laws regulating bankruptcies are very strict, and business failures are very rare [526](#) "Ganancias y Perdidas 1896" and "Repartición de las Ganancias 1896," December 31, 1896, pages 144-145, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

[527](#) "Ganancias y Perdidas 1899" and "Repartición de Ganancias 1899," Dec. 31, 1899, pp. 268-270, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

[528](#) "Ganancias y Perdidas 1901" and "Repartición de Ganancias 1901," Dec. 31, 1901, pp. 334, 356, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

529 “Ganancias y Perdidas 1902” and “Repartición de Ganancias 1902,” Dec. 31, 1902, p. 482, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

530 “Ganancias y Perdidas 1905” and “Repartición de Ganancias 1905,” Dec. 31, 1905, p.218, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

531 “Ganancias y Perdidas 1907” and “Repartición de Ganancias 1907,” Dec. 31, 1907, pp. 365-366, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

532 Gouy, *Pérégrinaciones*, 59.

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indeed.” [533](#) He claimed that no failure of any consequence had occurred in the past ten years and that business was conducted on a “very conservative basis.” The operating practices of the Barcelonnette community only strengthened this general characteristic. The Barcelonnettes constructed a social and business network that provided mutual support as it spread the risks and benefits. Begun in the days of the *almacenes de novedades* and *cajones de ropa* the same principles continued through the Porfiriato. A careful selection process preceded the establishment of a new Barcelonnette store. First, only senior and capable employees established new stores. His patron could loan him enough money, credit, and product to either become a travelling salesman and then set up an establishment in the Interior or he might directly set up a business. Or, if the patron amassed more than 100,000

francs he was expected to retire and return to France. He would leave two-thirds of his assets to the new member of the partnership and would continue to receive a share of profits until bought out from business. New businesses usually located in virgin or expanding markets.

This resulted in a web of Barcelonnette retailers throughout the Republic branching out from the capital where the largest firms acted as wholesalers

and creditors for their protégés. [534](#)

Most creditors did not worry even when a bankruptcy occurred. They knew that they would receive full payment from partners and family members associated with the debtor. When the *Cajon de Sol* owned by Denis Ollivier collapsed financially the repayment of creditors was assumed by J. Ollivier, owner of *La Ciudad de Londres* and presumed family relation.

The report noted that the liquidation was amiable and “all creditors are to be paid in full.” [535](#)

533 *Modern Mexico*, Mar. 1897, 6.

534 All of the Barcelonnette studies cover this subject. For example, see Gouy, *Pérégrinaciones*, 59.

Information on this pattern in the city of Puebla may be found in Leticia Gamboa Ojeda, “Los Barcelonnettes en la Ciudad de Puebla: Panorama de sus actividades económicas en el Porfiriato” in *México-Francia*, ed. Pérez-Siller, 171-194, especially 181. The figure of 100,000 Francs comes from Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique*, 399.

535 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Apr. 16, 1901, 2.

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The peculiar Mexican approach to credit, both commercial and consumer, also stabilized businesses but required deep capital reserves on the part of owners. Successful retailing in Mexico necessitated the extension of lengthy credit to wholesale and retail purchasers and therefore cut out smaller entrants into the field. American observers were baffled by the widespread use of credit and lengthy terms that characterized Mexican retail trade but most concluded that “in the end they cover their accounts.”

[536](#) Often stores issued account statements to its regular clients on an annual or semi-annual basis. This contradicted the retailing model in leading French stores such as the Bon Marché which operated on a strict cash-only basis. [537](#) One journal in Mexico noted that this practice required “immense capitalization” and reported that a leading jewelry house had outstanding accounts totalling \$100,000. On the other hand, they wrote off less than 2% as a result of bad debt prior to 1900. [538](#) The Palacio de Hierro wrote off a paltry \$9,000 for 1903. [539](#) This climbed to \$28,000 in 1905[540](#) before spiking to nearly \$53,000 for 1906[541](#) and finally \$70,000 in 1907, [542](#) the last year of available data. The same terms applied between businesses. In 1902

the stability of the commercial system weakened with the fluctuation and slide of the valuation of the silver peso. This led to an effort by the French Chamber of Commerce in Mexico to reduce credit “to the interior” (demonstrating the centralized wholesale and credit function of businesses in the Capital) to a period of four months. When they presented it to [536](#) Fergusson, *Mexico*, 136.

[537](#) Miller, *Bon Marché*, 54, 178; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 9.

[538](#) *Modern Mexico*, Nov. 1897, 9

[539](#) “Ganancias y Perdidas 1903,” Jan. 1, 19045, pp.56-57, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

[540](#) “Ganancias y Perdidas 1905,” Dec. 31, 1905, p.218, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

[541](#) “Ganancias y Perdidas 1906,” Dec. 31, 1906, p.333, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

[542](#) “Ganancias y Perdidas 1907,” Dec. 31, 1907, pp.365-366, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

the National Chamber the Germans—the dominant force in the hardware business—rejected the shortened duration. [543](#)

The Palacio de Hierro also illustrates two ways by which stores may have increased their liquid capital. In the absence of a stable Mexican banking system the Palacio acted as a savings institution and investment vehicle for employees, Barcelonnettes, and affluent Mexicans. For employees it offered savings accounts and loans. Such a benefit had both a moral dimension in promoting thrift as well as continuing a long Barcelonnette tradition in which the store owner held back a portion of an employee's salary with the understanding that the accrued sum would provide the initial investment when the employee eventually opened his own establishment. This savings and loan function for employees was likely a common practice among department stores given the paternalistic organization of these institutions. [544](#) The letters of department store clerk Anselme Charpenel home to his family in the Valley described how he sent home 10 of his 60 pesos earned each month and placed another 10 in the store bank of the Centro Mercantil at 6% interest. [545](#) Unfortunately the Palacio books offer only one year of these accounts but they suggest that the arrangement benefitted employees more than the company: in 1901 employee deposits (*cuentas de empleados acreedoras*) totalled \$25,387 in contrast with loans to employees (*cuentas de empleados deudoras*) equalling \$128,178. [546](#) Whether this imbalance was commonplace or an exception remains unknown at this point.

543 *Le Mexique*, Dec. 5, 1902, 1; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 17, 1903, 2.

544 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 99-105 discusses the use and purpose of pensions, provident funds (for funerals, disabilities, spousal benefits), and profit sharing at the Bon Marché. Miller discusses the paternalism of these programs as well as their cohesive role within a bureaucratic organization.

545 Arnaud et al., *Les Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 67. No exact date is attributed to this letter although Charpenel probably wrote this letter in

1910, the year that he arrived in Mexico after Centro Mercantil owner Sebastian Robert recruited him directly.

546 Balance de “El Palacio de Hierro” S. A., Dec. 31, 1901, pp. 390-391, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

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The banking function of the Palacio for the Barcelonnette community and beyond proved a far more lucrative proposition. In 1901 deposits totalled over \$1.1 million pesos. [547](#)

This bestowed upon the Palacio a considerable degree of financial flexibility given that the capitalization of the Palacio was \$4 million and gross earnings less than \$1 million at this time. Depositors tended to be French. They included famous perfumier and former Intervention soldier Paul St. Marc, [548](#) lesser knowns such as Luis Bouler and Luis Vizcarra, the influential Alfonso Ebrard of the Puerto de Liverpool store, and Louis Ollivier depositing for the department store group Signorat Honnorat y Cia. The last two deposits suggested that other Barcelonnette dry goods stores placed investments with the Palacio. [549](#) Barcelonnette firms in other business lines such as the Buen Tono cigarette factory also used the banking services of the Palacio. [550](#) Depositors resided throughout the Republic and beyond, including Barcelonnettes or their surviving spouses who had retired and returned to Paris or the Valley. [551](#) Victor Audiffred from Guanajuato (and probably a store owner given his famous last name) as well as the Lions Brothers of Puebla (who owned an *almacén de novedades* in that city from 1880 before transforming it into a department store in 1910) joined a long list [547](#) *Ibid.*

548 Paul Saint Marc came to Mexico with the first troops during the French Intervention. He was a low-ranking officer of the Third Regiment of the zouaves but left the army before the fall of Maximilian. He immediately set up perfume business and became an important member of the French

community in Mexico. He died in 1906 at the age of 68. See his obituary in the *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Apr. 29, 1906, 1, for the most concise account of his life. See Tron to Saint Marc, Jan. 21, 1893, and Aug. 16, 1893, pp. 36, 47, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

549 Unsigned letter to Louis Ollivier, Dec. 31, 1895, p. 98, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH; and H. Tron to J. B.

Ebrard y Cia. Sucs., June 17, 1904, p. 71, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

550 Remussat to El Buen Tono, S. A., Jan. 28, 1903, p. 472, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH. Acknowledging the receipt of a \$50,000 cheque from Hugo Scherer y Cia. The rate of return was set at a lower-than-normal 4% but funds would be made available with a short eight-day advance warning.

551 See, for example, Remussat to Antoine Proal, Jan. 4, 1906, p. 330, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH. Proal had retired and was living in Paris. Copiador III (1910-1914) lists extensively depositors living in France in 1910, whether Paris (pp.15, 16, 17), Cannes (14, 39), Barcelonnette (17, 23), Aix en Provence (26, 27), Nice (25), or Marseille (17).

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of investors from the states. [552](#) The Palacio was presumably considered a secure investment and attracted deposits from women and widows of well-known families including (among many others) the Señoras Josefa Gallardo, Victorina Garcin (deposited by Eduardo Garcin), Delfina G. de Caire, Estella Peker, Julia Maupuy, the powerful widow Génin, and the Viuda de Teresa and her daughters. [553](#) The famous Fortoul, Chapuy y Cia. of Guadalajara, owners of Las Fábricas de Francia department store in that city, deposited over \$20,000 in the name of Fortoul's wife in 1900. [554](#) In 1909 a Palacio director wrote the widow Chapuy that the business successors of her recently-deceased husband had deposited his 200 shares of the San Rafael paper factory and that of the Electricity and Irrigation

Company with the store in the Capital. [555](#) Earlier, in 1899, the Guadalajara firm had deposited over \$24,000 on behalf of two other widows. [556](#) The size of the deposits varied, from as low as \$3,000 [557](#) to upwards of \$50,000 [558](#) with interest rates ranging from 6% to 8%. Because the company books noted only deposits the total balances of individual accounts remain elusive. One exception is the account of Antonio Proal in Paris which reached over \$100,000 by 1906. [559](#) That depositors had to provide at least one month's warning—and often two—before withdrawing their [552](#) Unsigned to Victor Audiffred, Guanajuato, July 31, 1893; and Unsigned to Lions Hnos., Puebla, Aug. 19, 1893, pp. 46, 48, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH. For more on the Lions brothers, see Gamboa Ojeda,

“Barcelonnettes en la ciudad de Puebla,” 178.

553 In order, see pages 61 (Gallardo), 63 (Garcin), 67, 87 (de Caire), 100, 168 (Peker), 133 (Maupuy), 378-379

(Génin), and 35, 56, 77, 89, 113, 123 (Vda. de Teresa), Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

554 Unsigned to Fortoul Chapuy y Cia., Jan. 1, 1900, p. 246, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

555 Remussat to Mme. Vve. J. Chapuy, May 25, 1909, p.423, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

556 Unsigned to Fortoul Chapuy de Guadalajara, April 1, 1899, pp. 217, 218, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

Sent on the same day, the first letter acknowledged the receipt of \$15,500 for the widow of Emilio Gandoulf and the second of \$8,000 for the widow Remigio. Both were on terms of 7% with a 60 day notice of withdrawal.

557 Unsigned to Pedro Padral, Aug. 19, 1894, p. 57, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

558 See, for example, Tron to Sras. Vda. de Teresa é Hijas, July 1, 1895, p. 89; and Tron to Alfonso Ebrard, July 15, 1895, p. 90, Copiador I (1889-

1903), APH.

559 Proal, now retired, was a partner in the Puerto de Liverpool. Remussat to Proal, Jan. 4, 1906, p. 330, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH. Based on the \$82,500 balance noted in the entry Henri Tron to Proal, July 16, 1903, p. 3, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH, his account had grown by \$17,500 in less than three years.

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investments reinforces the likelihood that the Palacio invested these funds into various projects.

Employees

Department store hiring practices retained characteristics of the earlier *cajones de ropa* and *almacenes de novedades* while changing to accommodate the increased demands of the big stores as well as Porfirian ideas of paternalism towards workers. Department stores strove to maintain a positive public impression of their institutions as institutions of respectability and progress through their well-publicized treatment of employees. This treatment involved benefits to employees such as housing, profit-sharing, and savings programs as well as the imposition of moral codes of conducts. Store owners realized that their employees were an important part of their strategy of “Selling the Store” as an institution of respectable society. [560](#)

Barcelonnette owners relied heavily on Barcelonnette labour. This practice hearkened back to the earliest days of the community when emigrants from the valley exclusively staffed the stores. [561](#) Fellow valley members, often linked by ties of family, were considered more reliable, trustworthy, and indebted both socially and financially to the owner. [562](#) The result was a family atmosphere (with all its personality conflicts) among store [560](#) See Miller’s chapter, “Selling the Store” in *Bon Marche*, 190-230. Also consult Lancaster’s chapter,

“Behind the Counter: Workers and the Department Store,” in *Department Store*, 125-157. Finally, William Leach provides an American treatment of paternalism and employee benefits during this time period in *Land of Desire*, 115-122.

[561](#) The best extended description of the clerk’s life in a traditional *cajón de ropa* or *almacén de novedades* may be found in Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique*, 375-399 or the translated and reprinted version *De Barceloneta a la Republica Mexicana* (Mexico City: Banco de México, 1987), 193-208.

562 All the French accounts of the Barcelonnettes discuss this issue to some degree. For the indebtedness of immigrants to their new employers for the cost of the voyage, see Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 21.

I strongly recommend two contributions to this volume that rely heavily upon the letters of Barcelonnette clerks to reconstruct their life in the valley, recruitment, voyage, and experience in Mexican department stores: 205

personnel. Hiring exceptions were made in the case of Basques and French from the Pyrenees region who often allied with the Barcelonnettes in Mexico. [563](#)

The labour demands of the department stores broke this tradition of exclusivity. In the past, when the personnel of a store could range from a handful to 30 or 40, emigration from the valley sufficed. By the twentieth century, the Barcelonnette population of 18,000

could not possibly staff all the stores. The Palacio de Hierro alone hired 1600 employees, a number which included 1000 employees at the downtown store, many of them clerks, and 600 seamstresses in its main workshop on the outskirts of the city. [564](#) Barcelonnettes were by far the largest employers in the retail field; by comparison, the famous German hardware department store Casa Boker employed 170. [565](#) Visitor Wallace Thompson noted the presence of French and Mexican clerks in the French dry goods stores. [566](#) The 1903 *Massey-Gilbert Blue Book of Mexico* supports this in its list of English-speaking businesses and employees. Included were department store clerks with surnames such as Anda, Manuel and del Mazo. [567](#) This listing also underscores the need by stores for polyglot employees dealing with a cosmopolitan clientele, particularly the lucrative expatriate market. Porfirian stores often advertised their ability to converse with customers in their preferred language, a Anselme and Yvonne Charpenel, “L’Épopée des Barcelonnettes,” 52-72; and Pierre Martin-Charpenel, “Léon Martin au Mexique: Lettres (1902-1905),” 73-92.

563 Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique*, 261 ; and Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 21.

Prominent examples of Basques in French business include Andres Eizaguirre—who was Ernesto Pugibet’s Treasurer and right-hand man at El Buen Tono—and Santiago Arechiderra—the Centro Mercantil Administrative Council member and President of the organizing committee for the 1910 Mexican Commerce Festival (see end of Chapter Four).

564 John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 74-75.

565 Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 66.

566 Wallace Thompson, *The Mexican Mind: A Study of National Psychology* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1922), 57.

567 *The Massey-Gilbert Blue Book of Mexico. A Directory In English of the City of Mexico* (Mexico City: The Massey-Gilbert Company, 1901), 206, 250, 251.

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marketing strategy with a long history in Mexico. [568](#) Despite this increasing diversity in hiring practices I suspect that the vast majority of clerks—the public face of the store—

remained Barcelonnette. The presence of a French clerk assisting in fashion purchases undoubtedly carried a higher degree of prestige with a Mexican clientele. For Mexican employees the department store proper (not counting its off-site workshops) offered positions in local delivery, shipping and receiving, administration, and mail order departments among others.

Following not only Mexican custom but also the realities of the Barcelonnette emigration pattern the majority of department store employees, especially clerks, were men.

Across the Atlantic, department stores in France and Britain also overwhelmingly hired male clerks although after 1870 the feminization of the British clerk exceeded the French. ⁵⁶⁹ This contrasted starkly with the early French retail tradition of the female *modiste* and the infamous *grisettes*—her young and reputedly sexually exploitable female assistants. ⁵⁷⁰ The boutique and seamstress trade in Mexico also continued this tradition⁵⁷¹ but behind the counters of the *almacenes de novedades* and most department stores remained a masculine preserve.

Women did find limited employment opportunities within the department stores.

The new Centro Mercantil described its staff as “composed of misses in the *modas* 568 The Puerto de Veracruz, for example, claimed that each department could attend to the needs of customers in English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese in addition to Spanish (*El Imparcial*, July 3, 1899, 4). For a pre-Porfirian example see the ad in Eugenio Maillefert, *Directorio del comercio del Imperio Mexicano para el año de 1867* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 1992), 67, for the famous Zolly Hermanos haberdashery under the Portal de Mercaderes which advertised its command of German, Spanish, French, and Italian.

⁵⁶⁹ Miller, *Bon Marché*, 193; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 125-129, and 138.

⁵⁷⁰ Jennifer Jones, “*Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Régime Paris*” in *Sex of Things*, ed. De Grazia, 25-53.

⁵⁷¹ The obviously female *modistas* and the primarily female-owned silk shops (*Sederías*) continued to thrive in the Porfiriato much as they had during the 1860s (see their listings in Maillefert, *Directorio del Comercio*, 292, 297).

confecciones sections and young men in the other parts of the establishment.” [572](#) A 1902

photo of the Puerto de Veracruz department store floor staff pictured two women and over 60

men. [573](#) At the Palacio, one of the Tron family members wrote in 1903 a letter of reference for a Miss Jeanne Colón, noting that she had worked in the *Departamento de Confección de Sombreros* (Hat-Making Department) since January of 1900. [574](#) In a 1906 advertisement in the *Mexican Herald* the Palacio announced that its staff included “Many English speaking Clerks—both Ladies and Gentlemen.” [575](#) Henri Tron of the Palacio wrote to Oaxacan governor Emilio Pimentel in 1906 in response to a visit from a Señora Guadalupe Santaella Viuda (widow) de Cortés who carried a letter of introduction from Pimentel. After the usual pleasantries he promised that “the first vacancy at the counter will be offered to one of the daughters (*señoritas hijas*) of the lady under discussion. . .” [576](#) This is a surprising letter given that the petitioning woman is of a respectable social station—of the *gente decente*—

belonging as she does to the patronage circle (*camarilla*) of Pimentel. She may have fallen on hard times with the death of her husband, but we do not know if this was a recent event or what her financial situation was. For her to seek employment for her daughters not only in a department store but also one in a different state (Oaxaca City did not yet have a purpose-built department store) implies that she was either extremely desperate or else such a position in the department stores (or at least in the Palacio) was acceptable—even desirable—for daughters of decent families. Not enough data exists, but this letter questions the possible [572](#) Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva*, vol. 2, 760. As might be expected, this spatial confinement of female employees closely resembles that of the Bon Marché and other Parisian stores upon which Mexican stores patterned themselves. Miller, *Bon Marché*, 78.

[573](#) Proal and Charpenel, *Barcelonnettes en México*, 12.

[574](#) Copy of reference letter for Srita. Jeanne Colon, Jan. 2, 1903, p. 464, Copiador I (1889-1903), APH.

575 *The Mexican Herald*, May 13, 1906, 9.

576 Henri Tron to Emilio Pimentel, Oct. 31, 1906, p. 317, Copiador II (1903-1910), APH.

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assumption that female clerks in Mexico mirrored the lower middle class social status that characterized their Parisian counterparts at the Bon Marché. [577](#)

Far and away the most visible and prestigious public placement for women in the big stores was as a *modiste* imported from France. In 1905 the Puerto de Veracruz department store announced the recently arrived *modista Parisiense* Madame Damaris. After her voyage upon the French steamer “La Navarre” she took over management of the department for women’s fashions, hats, and lingerie. [578](#) In 1909, Madame Rosa Warin, contracted as a modiste for the fashion and hat department (*Modes et Chapeaux*) of the Ciudad de Londres, wrote Finance Minister Limantour asking his assistance in releasing her goods from Veracruz customs. She noted that she was not wealthy and had brought six crates of furnishings and other belongings to avoid the cost of renting a furnished hotel room in Mexico. [579](#) Other department stores also publicized their in-house French *modistes* who could conjure up the most fantastic and luxurious creations for a ball at the Casino Español or the races at Peralvillo, but only out of materials purchased on the premises. [580](#)

In spite of this increasing female presence in the retail sector the male clerk remained ubiquitous in the popular imagination. Written and cartoon dramatizations of encounters between clerks and customers always involved males behind the counter and women in front.

The only depiction of female clerks appeared in carnivalesque accounts of the world such as [577](#) Miller, *Bon Marché*, 78.

578 *La Mujer Mexicana*, Mar. 1905, back cover.

579 Rosa Warin to JYL, Mexico City, Nov. 15, 1909, CDLIV 1909, Roll 63, Carp. 30, Archivo JYL-CONDUMEX. Warin is probably the “French artist ladies’ tailor” mentioned by a Ciudad de Londres ad in *The Mexican Herald* prior to the Centennial celebrations touting “The Paris Touch” which “confers distinction upon these street costumes.” August 28, 1910, 12.

580 For the Puerto de Liverpool see *The Mexican Herald*, July 3, 1910, 8. For the Palacio de Hierro, *The Mexican Herald*, Aug. 25, 1910, 6; and in its 400 page almanac/agenda gift to its customers, *Grandes Almacenes de “El Palacio de Hierro” Obsequio a nuestros favorecedores. Agenda para el año 1900* (Mexico City: Tip. El Lápiz de Aguila, 1900), 47.

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the one imagining society if feminists had their way. [581](#) In 1909, W. E. Carson observed that

“the custom of employing female clerks is only beginning to be adopted in Mexico’s capital.” [582](#)

Paternalist capitalism shaped the relationship between department store owners and employers. Leading employers during the Porfiriato often touted benefits to workers such as employee housing, medical care, education, and other services. [583](#) The Porfirian regime often pointed to these policies to show how Porfirian progress benefitted workers as well as employers. Not unlike in the United States and other industrializing nations most of these policies were undertaken in company towns dedicated to extractive industries or at factories of major manufacturers such as the Cerveceria Cuauhtémoc in Monterrey or the Buen Tono cigarette company

in Mexico City. But these were mostly blue-collar employees (and, depending on the industry and location, often of rural origin) engaged in the manufacturing and “production” side of the economy. Much less work has considered these policies on employees in the service or “consumption” side of the economy who were usually white collar, urban, and considered themselves current or future members of the same cultural class of not only their employers but also the customers whom they served. In this light, department store employee relations need to be viewed as how owners balanced traditional labour relations techniques with the class aspirations of employees and the perceptions of customers who viewed these clerks as members of an urban respectable society with greater

“needs” than a peon working on a hacienda.

581 *Actualidades*, Mar. 15, 1909, 13. This cartoon montage entitled “El Feminismo” (note the masculine gendering of what should be a feminine “La Feminisma”) offered 13 images of why feminism would be great.

These included female counterclerks serving male customers along with women serenading men, wearing pants, and offering up their tramcar seats to males.

582 W. E. Carson, *Mexico: The Wonderland of the South* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1909), 56.

583 For example, Tony Morgan, “Proletarians, Politicos, and Patriarchs: The Use and Abuse of Cultural Customs in the Early Industrialization of Mexico City, 1880-1910,” in *Rituals of Rule*, eds. Beezley, Martin, and French, 151-171.

At the same time, Barcelonnette retailing traditions and transatlantic influences determined certain policies as much as the importance of a positive public image of worker relations for business and political reasons. The longstanding Barcelonnette custom and Parisian department store practice of live-in staff stands out as a salient example of this. The Palacio de Hierro reserved its fourth and fifth floors for employee quarters. The store also fed employees in a grand dining hall located on one of the floors. [584](#) Whether both men and women employees resided in-house remains unclear. Even today, walking along Avenida Carranza, one can look up at the old Fábricas Universales building and the 1920s Palacio de Hierro store and see that the top floor and its windows are much smaller. Employees continue to eat upstairs where an employee kitchen remains, at least in the Palacio de Hierro.

During the Porfiriato most, if not all, of the department stores offered this benefit. In the *Blue Book* directory a considerable number of the listed English-speaking employees gave their employer and listed their residence as “Same.” Multiple entries for “clerks” and

“employees [*empleados*]” appear for the Palacio de Hierro, [585](#) the Ciudad de Londres, [586](#)

Puerto de Veracruz, [587](#) and Centro Mercantil. [588](#) Although several of the names are those of important Barcelonnette families suggesting that perhaps family members received special treatment a majority are either not French or are not identified with the ownership elite.

While many employees resided in the store, the directory also lists a number of clerks and employees who lived in either rooms or apartments separate from the store. In-store residence combined equal parts of tradition, supervision of employees, and paternalism that [584](#) *Le Mexique*, May 5, 1898, 20, cited in Gouy, *Pérégrinations*, 60-63.

[585](#) *Massey-Gilbert Blue Book*, 206, 213, 230, 251, 266, 271.

[586](#) *Ibid.*, 213, 242.

[587](#) *Ibid.*, 214, 218, 230, 243.

588 *Ibid.*, 250, 266.

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allowed owners to demonstrate their public commitment to the advancement of their workers.

Pay, while not exactly generous, exceeded averages in the capital. Furthermore, considering that many employees received heavily subsidized room and board, salaried clerks did fairly well for themselves and could afford to place a considerable portion of their pay into the store bank or send money home to their families. Salaries for clerks began at approximately 20 to 30 pesos per month and increased with experience and responsibility.

Anselme Charpenel started at 20 pesos per month at the Centro Mercantil in 1910, received his first raise to 40 pesos the next year, and enjoyed another a year later bringing his salary to 60 pesos. [589](#) Léon Martin began work for Las Fábricas Universales in 1902 at 20 pesos per month and complained that the annual salary review was unfair and that the owners kept telling him he was too young for a raise. Nevertheless, by June 1904 he was earning 30

pesos monthly, 45 by September, and by his death of appendicitis in March of 1905 he received a monthly salary of 75 pesos. [590](#) Overall, clerks with any experience enjoyed salaries exceeding that of most workers in the capital who range from 30 pesos for unskilled and upwards of 60 for skilled and semi-skilled. [591](#) Profit-sharing also figured into at least the Palacio de Hierro pay structure. It based its 1898 incorporation upon that of the Bon Marché which made employees shareholders in the company. [592](#) Whether other stores followed this lead (especially the Puerto de Liverpool which incorporated next in 1907) remains unknown.

589 Charpenel and Charpenel, “L’Épopée,” in *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, eds. Arnaud et al., 67.

590 Martin-Charpenel, “Léon Martin,” in *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, eds. Arnaud et al., 84-85.

591 John Lear, “Mexico City: Popular Classes and Revolutionary Politics,” in *Cities of Hope: People, Protests, and Progress in Urbanizing Latin America, 1870-1930*, eds. Ronn Pineo and James A. Baer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 60.

592 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Apr. 8, 1898, 3.

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Employees followed house rules on morality and conduct befitting members of the *gente decente* in return for the benefits and status associated with working for a department store. Undoubtedly department store employees faced conduct rules traditionally imposed upon workers in Barcelonnette stores as well as in practice at the large Parisian stores. [593](#)

Restrictions applied to what little free time employees (especially those living on-premise) possessed. Store management usually steered their charges towards educational and

“healthy” diversions such as concerts, sports, social events, or classes sponsored by the Employee Mutualist Society, French social clubs such as the *Cercle Français*, or the YMCA. [594](#) Drinking was prohibited. Curfews were enforced. Sexual misconduct faced serious punishment. Employers likely fined or fired employees for such infractions. *Gente decente* values and management anxiety over store image made the protection of the virtue

of female employees a priority for store employers. Concerns over the morality of unescorted young ladies outside the house engaged in wage labour troubled middle-class minds. Since hiring married women was out of the question (they were to tend to the home and the family) only young, single—and therefore vulnerable—girls were eligible for hire. As for the Parisian *modistes* hired in Mexico, the available documentation suggests they were unmarried and given that the stores touted their experience we can assume that a woman with some degree of maturity made the crossing. The Limantour-Tron letter suggests that their assistants and female clerks were young and single. In Western Europe and the United States mixed salacious and fearful imaginations of girls such as these mingling with smooth male clerks and sweet-talking male customers drove a whole international literary genre, fueled a 593 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 190-221.

594 For information on the *Cercle français*, see Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 40-41; and for the YMCA, see Glenn Avent, “A Popular and Wholesome Resort: Gender, Class, and the YMCA in Porfirian Mexico” (master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 1996).

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social commentary niche, and compelled owners such as the Bon Marché’s Boucicault to publicly demand and enforce the strictest moral codes for girls so as to reaffirm bourgeois values and the proper image of the department store. [595](#) Future studies on this subject in Mexico will likely reveal similar sentiments given the ready adoption of foreign literature and cultural trends among respectable society. [596](#)

Although granted *gente decente* status, employees nevertheless had to earn their wage. They also united among themselves and often in solidarity with employees of other stores to achieve certain improvements such as shortened hours and holidays. Store owners varied in their approach to these requests. Some placed themselves at the vanguard of these concessions while others strenuously opposed change.

Employees organized under the rubric of the *Sociedad Mutualista de Empleados de Comercio* in 1892. [597](#) The idea for a permanent association of commerce employees was finally accepted among the different sectors during the fight for Sunday as a day of rest. [598](#)

The society grew quickly and built its own centre at which members could enjoy various recreations. [599](#) In 1905 the society voted to admit non-employees but only at a ratio of four ⁵⁹⁵ Miller, *Bon Marché*, 192-197. For the literary genre on the perils of consumption to women as consumers or clerks, browse through: Emile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Paris: Charpentier, 1883); Margarete Böhme, *The Department Store: A Novel of To-Day*, trans. Ethel Colburn Mayne (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1912); Theodore Dreisser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Penguin, 1981); Paul Dubuisson, *Les voleuses de grands magasins* (Paris: A. Storck, 1902); and M. F. Honoré, *Les employés de commerce à Paris au point de vue social* (Paris: n.p., 1895).

⁵⁹⁶ One popular and widely-read source for the sexual danger or license found between store personnel and their customers was the cheap and usually racy paperbacks offered by the *bibliotecas económicas*, or popular book stores. As discussed in Chapter 2 these printers and retailers possessed an impressive distribution network for their products as well as an avid reader base. Proof that these books did choose stores as their setting comes in an article entitled “Flirting at the Counter” in *El Imparcial*, Dec. 18, 1897, 2. The article recounts the actual recent occurrence of an employee of a *cajón* making sexual advances towards a female customer trying on gloves. It blames “this commercial epidemic of flirting learned in the novels of the *bibliotecas económicas*. ”

⁵⁹⁷ Moisés González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, vol. 4 of *Historia Moderna de México*, ed Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 350.

⁵⁹⁸ *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Aug. 23, 1902, 2.

⁵⁹⁹ The society planned a new reunion centre that opened late in 1910, including a café, billiards, library, and

“all games permitted by law.” *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Oct. 31, 1906, 3.

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employees members to one non-employee. [600](#) As a mutualist society, the organization also assisted with payments for funerals, medical treatment, and pensions for widows.

Department stores typically opened at 7 or 8 o'clock in the morning, closed between 1 and 3 o'clock for lunch, then reopened until 8 at night. [601](#) Employees officially worked thirteen hour days and by 1902 a number of stores reduced their hours by closing earlier at 7

o'clock. When two of the stores, El Centro Mercantil and La Francia Maritima opted out of the agreement over 3000 workers protested and forced compliance. [602](#) Junior employees did not enjoy the long meal break, often wolfing down their food during a paltry rest of 30

minutes to one hour while senior employees enjoyed the full period. Beyond official hours, employees spent more time cleaning, stocking shelves, unpacking crates, and preparing samples for travelling salesmen. [603](#)

These hours continued a long Mexican tradition and mark a distinct difference from American and European department stores. In the name of progress the business paper *La Semana Mercantil* urged stores to adopt American hours of business from 10 until 5 o'clock for the betterment of employees and consumers. It noted in 1896 that this custom was injurious to all, prejudicial to the many workers in other economic sectors who had only this lunch time to shop and detrimental to store employees whose late hours deprived them of the ability to “leisurely enjoy the pleasures of family.” [604](#) This argument overlooked that most clerks were young, single males unable to afford a family.

600 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 12, 1905, 3.

601 González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, 288.

602 *Ibid.*, 288.

603 Both Anselme Charpenel and León Martin describe this in their letters as Barcelonnette clerks. Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 66, 81.

604 *La Semana Mercantil*, Mar. 23, 1896, 157-8.

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Employees also fought for a day of rest on Sundays. Historically, most owners of the Barcelonnette clothing stores (*cajones de ropa* and *almacenes de novedades*) had given Sunday afternoons off after a morning of unpacking and restocking of goods. Employees at smaller garment stores owned by other nationalities, especially the Spanish, did not fair so well. Several agreements among owners fell apart as stores broke the rules and owners feared that employees “abused” their free time. [605](#) In May of 1904 the Palacio de Hierro spontaneously granted Sunday as a day of rest and employees marked the first anniversary with celebrations. [606](#) Employees still worked most holidays, and León Martin at Las Fábricas Universales complained that he worked until midnight most days and two in the morning on New Year’s Day. [607](#) In 1909 the Puerto de Veracruz granted All Saints’ Day and Day of the Dead (November 1 and 2) as employee holidays. When other stores did not comply French, Spanish, and Mexican employees marched in the streets singing in French the *Internationale*. [608](#)

Importantly, new Barcelonnette emigrants were exactly that: workers. The notion of apprenticeship, of arriving as an employee with a chance of rapid advancement and eventual ownership, faded as the Porfiriato advanced.

“Trade conquistadors” became “proles” singing the *Internationale* in the streets of Mexico City. The fluid, merit-based system which had characterized the early decades of Barcelonnette emigration ossified and became more prone to nepotism and exploitation during the department store decades of the 1890s and 1900s.

605 It is important to note that the press largely supported employee demands for Sunday as a day of rest under the umbrella of progress. A lively conversation among the newspapers in the capital ensued and lasted for at least four months. Employees of department and other stores carrying multiple product lines were joined by those employees of the *camiserías* and *sederías*. Meetings attracted over 500 attendees. See, for example, *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Aug. 20, 1902, 3; Aug. 21, 1902, 2; and Aug. 23, 1902, 2. Additional articles can be found in *El Imparcial*, Aug. 23, 1902, 2; Oct. 6, 1902, 2; Oct. 9, 1902, 3; and Oct. 16, 1902, 3.

606 González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, 287.

607 Arnaud et al., *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 82.

608 González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, 288.

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The hierarchy of the community became much more rigid. Family members of this elite still worked in the store but often received better treatment and faster promotion over other Barcelonnettes. In 1904 Léon Martin bitterly wrote home to his brother describing his disillusionment. “In this dump only the nephews of the owners advance and they shit on the rest [*qui emmerdent les autres*].” [609](#) He declared his patrons “avaricious,” continuing “they are not like bosses in France” and “Spanish and Mexican

owners seem better than our compatriots.” Bosses who were so nice when they recruited back home in the valley

“changed completely once you arrived.” In Mexico employees did not speak to the patrons, said Martin, and he concludes that “One must be rich to be accepted by these people and in Mexico I only rarely visit our cousin Pellotier [a member of one of the successful families].” [610](#) Martin expressed a likely widespread sentiment among those at the bottom of the community that the system was rigged against them. He expressed indignation that “the bosses are travelling to France, and on the account of the employees! Our first patron is going to France this year, the Derbez brothers will certainly go next year. They are all rich and they would be able to retire comfortably [and follow the tradition of passing down the business to new blood], but of course it is the employees and the rest of the unfortunates who must continue to labour.” [611](#) Department store organization in Mexico was becoming more bureaucratized, hierarchical, and specialized reflecting not only the maturing of the Barcelonnette community but also trends occurring throughout Mexican and Western societies more generally. [612](#)

609 Arnaud et al, *Barcelonnettes au Mexique*, 83.

610 *Ibid.*, 84.

611 *Ibid.*, 85.

612 In his Introduction, Michael Miller considers how the Bon Marché reflected these trends in French society.

Miller, *Bon Marché*, 3-16.

Clientele

Who were the clientele of these department stores? Popular misconception stubbornly holds that the stereotypical shopper at department stores and other respectable commercial establishments was a light-skinned, middle-to-upper class female. Most foreign travellers viewing Mexico through the cultural lens of gendered consumption dominant in their own societies continued this popular image. Besides, for Mexicans the opportunities provided by male clerks and female customers for double-entendres and other manifestations of popular humour made the ubiquitous female consumer a received wisdom. For historians favouring a dependency-theory approach this class-race-gender image travels hand-in-glove with the belief that these stores sold only luxury imported goods.

A particular oddity of travellers' accounts is the frequent rehashing of the dying custom of women customers purchasing their goods from their carriage while parked at the curbside in front of the store. In 1888 William Curtis repeated this, claiming "It is a common thing to see a row of carriages before a fashionable store with a clerk at the door of each one exhibiting silks or gloves or ribbons." He did admit that "in some of the stores are parlors in which a señora can sit if she likes and have goods brought to her" but added that "none but foreigners and the common people stand at the counter and buy." ⁶¹³ As late as 1907, Nevin O. Winter feverishly fantasized that "Another example of the Oriental exclusiveness is seen in the life of the ladies of the wealthier classes who always drive in closed carriages. . . and, when shopping, do not deign to leave the carriage." ⁶¹⁴ While possibly true for an infinitesimally small number of consumers patronizing exclusive shops such as the tailor ⁶¹³ William E. Curtis, *The Capitals of Spanish America* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1888), 39.

⁶¹⁴ Nevin O. Winter, *Mexico and Her People of Today: An Account of the Customs, Characteristics, Amusements, History and Advancement of the Mexicans, and the Development and Resources of their Country*, revised edition (Boston: L. C. Page & Co., 1923), 162-163. First published in 1907.

Louis Sarre, by 1907 *no one* shopped by carriage at department stores or the fashionable *almacenes de novedades*.

These stereotypes make no sense from either from a business or historical perspective. The department store business model of leaner profit margins on a high volume turnover—one that the Barcelonnettes had practiced for a half-century—by necessity cannot work without a broad base of consumers. That department stores received praise for their

“democratization of luxury” was not mere hyperbole but rather caught the essence of this cultural and economic phenomenon. [615](#) In a shallow market like Mexico, a mass retailer had little choice but to promote a democratic admission policy. Early on, most Barcelonnette retailers adopted a pragmatic approach to reach deep into the Mexican market while at the same time retaining an image of respectability.

Thus even prior to the department stores the clientele of Barcelonnette *cajones de ropa* and later *almacenes de novedades* included both sexes and a broad spectrum of society.

Clients were both male and female. An 1867 commercial directory includes illustrated ads for leading *almacenes de novedades* such as Las Fábricas de Francia, El Puerto de Liverpool, and La Francia Maritima features both male and female customers window shopping and purchasing at the counter. [616](#) Emile Chabrand’s 1892 portrait of a Barcelonnette store includes customers of both sexes. [617](#) Importantly, both these examples located customers inside and at the counter—not out on the curb. Jurgen Buchenau places the shift from respectable women patronizing from the curbside to store interiors (often unattended) in the 1880s [618](#) but I suspect this may have begun much earlier, possibly during the Intervention. In [615](#) Miller, *Bon Marché*, 165-166.

[616](#) Maillefert, *Directorio del Comercio*, 193, 201.

617 Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique*, 375-395, for the whole account of the store.

618 Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 57.

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addition to loosening cultural restrictions on respectable women in public, the move out of the carriage and into the store accelerated with the arrival of the tram system, first mule-drawn and later electric. Chabrand's account records a clientele spanning wide range of economic classes—from those purchasing silks down to the consumers of printed calico—as well as racial and national backgrounds. Chabrand describes a Spaniard and an English woman whom he postulates is likely the wife of an Anglican minister. He confirms that store personnel collectively spoke a number of languages in order to service the expatriate colonies, usually offering German, Italian, Portuguese and English in addition to the standard French and Spanish. He also includes a vignette on the Indian from the hacienda among the crowd at the counter, whose shirt and pants probably cost less than a peso but whose hat probably cost a hundred times that. [619](#) Continuing, he tells of a group of Indians entering the store and how one who could speak Spanish bargained for the rest, beginning with an offer barely a quarter that asked by the clerk before finally working upwards. At least a portion of Mexico City's indigenous population felt comfortable enough and sufficiently understood the retailing rules to enter Barcelonnette stores in pursuit of at least some of their material needs.

They also had enough money.

French commercial commentators such as F. Bianconi in 1889 explained this market and its possibilities and limitations. Bianconi informed manufacturers of the wide gulf separating the rich and poor in Mexico and that in order to succeed they must follow the rule that while the elite are prodigious consumers “the mass of consumers above all demands articles at

a good price.” [620](#) Importantly, he included the indigenous population as a market [619](#) Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique*, 391, 392. Chabrand includes two accounts, one of Indian peons from the hacienda and another, on page 391, of “less-civilized” Indians whose backward state is made obvious by their lack of foot- and head-wear.

[620](#) Bianconi, *Le Mexique*, 116.

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for French goods such as jewelry and candles. [621](#) He pleaded with producers to adapt to the Mexican market, not only its ability to absorb goods but also to its tastes. Given the slide of French imports his compatriots did not heed him, but the Barcelonnettes did. So too did Finance Minister Limantour who kept a copy of the book in his library. [622](#)

To be sure, Porfirian department stores were unabashedly institutions of the *gente decente*. They reflected a *gente decente* social vision of order, progress, and abundance consonant with that of a larger transnational class of the bourgeoisie. But the *gente decente* was more a cultural than economic category comprised of a membership ranging from semi-skilled labourers to business leaders united more by a compatible worldview and value system than a comparable financial situation. [623](#) To accommodate both this shared vision and wide range of disposable incomes required a varied price structure. Expensive and often imported goods provided the more affluent with their material piece of modernity and social prestige while domestic factories and cheap imports served the same purpose for the middling and humbler classes. Moreover, one should not overlook that while the values of the stores may have been those of the *gente decente*, their attractions in terms of abundance, novelty, colour, and display appealed to all economic strata and racial categories not to mention gender and sexual orientation in society.

I add this last point to remind readers that while Porfirian society may have gendered production and consumption as masculine and feminine, respectively, Porfirian males did not leave all the shopping to women. Male fashions consumed considerable space in both stores 621 *Ibid.*, 113

622 *Catálogo de la Biblioteca del Señor Licenciado don José Y. Limantour* (Mexico City: n.p., 1913).

623 French, *A Peaceful and Working People*, 4-7.

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and catalogues. 624 In addition, large *almacenes de novedades* such as New England and High Life catered exclusively to men. 625 As mentioned in Chapter Two, certain newspapers such as *Frivolidades* catered to an affluent (or at least free-spending) male clientele. The papers of José Yves Limantour reveal that he was quite the shopper in Paris and often made purchases for others, among them President Díaz and his wife. 626 Finally, Victor Macías González continues to compile a body of work on the construction of the Porfirian male (and gay male) consumer. 627

This democratization of luxury illuminates the way in which material abundance formed not only the cornerstone of modern Mexican retailing but also served as the most visible and widespread benefit to mankind during the Age of Progress. For both cultural purposes and economic pragmatism stores commonly advertised the sale of “Luxury and Common Goods” or, as the banner outside the Centro Mercantil stated, of “Fine, Half-Luxury, Common Goods” to tap this market. 628 A typical description of the Palacio de Hierro in 1900 expressed its wish to serve all of respectable society, asserting that “So it is in that store that one can find articles ranging from the most modest and indispensable to our 624 In a 1906 Palacio de Hierro catalogue in my possession, men’s coats, shirts, and

ties occupy pages 61-66 and 70-78. Unfortunately the first pages are missing and, as a consequence, so, too, is the information on the exact season and product line emphasis.

625 Although ads for these two make obvious their clientele, one entry in *The Mexican Herald*, July 3, 1910, 3, states clearly: “We Deal Only in Clothing for Men and Boys.”

626 Perhaps one of the most enlightening examples of Porfirian elite males as conscientious shoppers comes from a series of exchanges between Limantour, Díaz, and Carmelita (Díaz’s wife). Limantour is on a lengthy vacation in Paris and the sea resort of Biarritz. He describes in detail his choice of diamonds and emeralds from three different Paris jewellers—Cartier, Morel, and Boucheron—and which jeweller will set those stones in a collar and tiara. He documents the plans of each house and meticulously and explains his decisions in terms of

“good taste” (*buen gusto*). He concludes his last letter to Carmelita with “Believe me, Carmelita, I am your most addicted and sincere friend.” See in particular: Porfirio Díaz to JYL, Mexico City Nov. 20, 1906; JYL to Carmelita, Paris, May 24, 1906; JYL to Carmelita, Biarritz, Aug. 4, 1906, CDLIV 1906, Roll 37, Carp. 1, JYL-CONDUMEX.

627 For published work, see Victor M. Macías-González, “The *Lagartijo* at *The High Life*: Masculine Consumption and Homosexuality in Porfirian Mexico,” in *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901*, eds. Robert McKee Irwin, Edward J. McCaughan, and Michelle Rocio Nasser (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003): 228-249.

628 See photo in Proal and Charpenel, *Empire des Barcelonnettes*, 39.

working class to the most exquisite and the most tasteful goods that can appeal to the middle and aristocratic classes of this refined capital.” [629](#) Even as far back as 1867 the Commerce Directory of Mexico City featured ads such as that of the Ciudad de Londres offering an

“elegant selection of luxurious and common goods” while illustration for the Fábricas de Francia ad included a range of window shoppers that spanned from *reboso*- and *sombrero*-

wearers to those sporting top-hats and tails. [630](#) Department stores continued in the tradition of the earlier stores described by Chabrand in 1892. Wallace Thompson remarked “The French dry-goods stores, with their French and Mexican clerks. . . seem the ablest of all foreigners to give the Mexican women, from the most exclusive ladies to the humblest peon, the peculiar attention which custom has made them desire. . . always there is a subtle understanding of class, a subtle patronage of the woman in a *reboso* and a subtle deference to the lady with a hat. . .” [631](#) What becomes clear from these observations is that Barcelonnette department stores, like the *almacenes de novedades* and *cajones de ropa* which preceded them, offered a wide variety of goods to an equally broad spectrum of society. A composite portrait of their products, clientele, and business practices suggest that this appeal may not have reached the poorest of the poor or the richest of the richest but certainly attracted a far wider swath of the population than previously imagined. Perhaps *The Mexican Herald* newspaper expressed this best in 1895 when describing the department stores: “Here the rich lady, who has her liveried coach without, stands side by side with the poor, weather-beaten Indian from the mountains. And there is that with which to satisfy them both.” [632](#)

629 Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva*, vol. 1, 261.

630 Maillefert, *Directorio del Comercio*, 192, 197.

631 Thompson, *The Mexican Mind*, 57.

632 *The Mexican Herald*, Dec. 25, 1895, 8.

As this chapter has shown, a considerable source of the modernizing aura possessed by the department store in Mexico derived from its origins, ownership, organization, financial success, broad clientele, and democratization of luxury. But what was it about the institution itself that proved so attractive to late-nineteenth century societies around the globe? The following chapter pursues this question considering the historical-anthropological as well as social significance of the goods and novel retailing techniques adopted by Mexico City department stores. Placing department stores and other retail architecture within the context of the Porfirian effort to radically transform the visual landscape of the city into an expression of national progress reinforces the modernizing significance of the goods, practices, and organization of the stores in Mexican national culture.

Chapter Four

Capital Investments Part II:

Constant Innovation and the Expression of Progress

From their beginning, department stores thrived on introducing constant innovations and novelties. Their ready adoption of new retailing practices, new products, and new displays placed them as the representative institution of a progressive age. Yet while these stores reflected the values of a modernizing culture, the stores also shaped and constructed that culture. Department stores may have admitted a broad swath of Mexican society, but the image they created and sold with their architecture, displays, organization, and consumer rituals solidly represented that aspired to by the *gente decente*. Department stores anchored a host of fixed location retail stores (*casas de comercio*) such as jewelry and home decoration stores that moved the market off the street and into a controlled private/public marketplace.

In these locations retailers spent considerable effort, imagination, and capital displaying goods on the store floor, in street windows, and in sales literature such as print advertisements and catalogues in a way that tapped into the broader culture's association of goods and modernity and then invested goods with significance that encouraged a particular way of viewing the world. In short, department stores sold the material culture of modernizing Mexico, or more specifically of a *gente decente* vision of a modern Mexico.

So powerful was their role as producers of cultural meaning that department stores did not even need goods to sell this image of modernity. Department stores led the business community in transforming the visual reality of the capital through their breathtaking architectural styles and highly

conspicuous position within public rituals such as holiday parades. Efforts to rationalize, beautify, and remake the city as an expression of Mexican
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economic and cultural progress reach back into the colonial period. The 1856 Ley Lerdo accelerated this project by prying urban land from Church control and opening the door to the greater commercialization and secularization of the capital. Not until the government of Porfirio Díaz, however, did the national leadership have the resources and internal unity to undertake fully this task. Historians have concentrated on the myriad efforts of the Porfirian government to transform the city into a showcase of Mexican economic and cultural modernity. As photographs of Porfirian Mexico City clearly reveal, however, department stores and other modern retailers played a monumental role in expressing Porfirian progress to both Mexicans and foreign visitors alike.

The brilliance of department stores is that they capitalized on a long-developing trend in Western societies whereby people invested in—and derived meaning from—the man-made cultural artifacts that constructed their environment to an ever-growing degree. The work of material culture anthropologists helps us to consider this phenomenon. [633](#) Goods, they point out, carry connotation of class status, race, age, gender, and other categories by which cultures employ to grant order and sensibility to the world around them. The meaning of goods, however, is not necessarily cross-cultural. The significance of colours, materials, and styles are equally culturally specific. Moreover, the goods used by one society may be unknown in another.

Numerous scholars have observed the increasing role of goods in Western society over the past half-millennium, spurring and spurred-on by increasing trade and commercial [633](#) Among others: Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978); Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York:

Columbia University Press, 1983); and Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

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capitalism. The abundance of goods appears equally in artistic depictions from the Italian Renaissance, seventeenth-century Holland, and colonial Mexico where paintings pointedly feature the inaugural procession of the new Viceroy passing through the abundance of goods offered in the Parián market in Mexico City. Conspicuous consumption and the meaning of goods did not originate in the late-nineteenth century.

But a cascade of technological progress and corresponding advances in production, transportation, and communication accelerated the significance of goods in nineteenth-century societies. Not only did the economic engines of modern society achieve the mass production of traditional goods but created a plethora of new ones. These goods often suited the specific cultural requirements of the leading class of this economic transformation: the bourgeoisie. Examples of this include new leisure pursuits such as parlour games and beach paraphernalia or the explosion of home appliances and furnishings catering to the middle-class obsession with the home as a site of consumption.

Department stores and other leading retailers of the Porfirian Age served not only to bring these goods to Mexico and popularize them but also to educate Mexicans as to their use and social significance as defined by the bourgeois culture of France or perhaps England, Germany or another “modern” nation. Through displays, advertising, and employee-client relationships department stores helped to define and place goods within a cultural web of meaning. This served to visibly mark social and other hierarchies in an increasingly anonymous city environment dominated by the “urban crowd.”

For Mexican consumers, a sign of membership in modern and respectable society was the ability to purchase goods—to consume—in quantity and quality appropriate to one's social station. Such a task was not an easy one. With an ever-increasing abundance of 227

goods, the creation of new goods, a quickening fashion cycle, and the pronouncements of a commercial press and pressure of social peers constantly adding new “needs,” Porfirian consumers found themselves devoting considerable time to educating themselves as consumers. As we shall see, department stores helped Porfirian consumers with this education at the same time as it kept the cycle going.

Many modernizers saw department stores as creating a common set of cultural values, reference points and categories. An analogy could be made between the function of department stores and state projects such as public education in inculcating values, behaviours and identities. The main difference is that Business arguably did a better job than the State. These were the values of capitalist economy and culture and applied not only nationally but globally. The simultaneous rise of the *gente decente*, mass consumption, and the Porfirian-era vogue of cosmopolitanism was not a coincidence. An international common culture as a mark of modernity is exactly what Agusté Genín is speaking of in his *Notes sur le Mexique* when he describes the modernizing function of department stores and the disappearance of distinct indigenous societies and cultures under the inexorable attraction and education of the goods and values of a culture of Western capitalism. In other words, department stores pleased Porfirians by promoting cultural and economic system comfortably familiar to the *gente decente* on whose values the Porfirian development program was based.

Nearly every aspect of the store served both an educational and entertainment function but perhaps the most consistent blend of these two goals was the store's expression of the nineteenth-century belief in progress into which the whole *gente decente* value system was tied. In Mexico, William Beezley has termed this widespread yet somewhat fuzzy faith 228

in progress as the “Porfirian Persuasion.” Nearly every leading ideology or belief system brought to life during the nineteenth century—be it Comte’s Positivism, Marx’s and Engel’s Communism, or assorted Utopian movements such as that of Saint Simonianism—expressed this seemingly unstoppable betterment of society thanks to the technological and productive advances achieved by humanity. Located in the heart of urban centres the department store was constantly transforming itself, dramatically enacting and making tangible this belief system. The building, the inventory, the displays, and the advertising were all in a constant state of transition. It replicated the bourgeois cultural imperative of novelty, fashion, change—of improvement for the self, family, and nation. Consider how the construction and growth of the first department store in Mexico, the Palacio de Hierro, materially expressed this.

The Palacio opened its doors for business on July 1, 1891. Its origins date back to 1860 when Alexandre Reynaud and V. Gassier—two Frenchmen from the Barcelonnette region—opened Las Fábricas de Francia under the Portal de las Flores. ⁶³⁴ In 1876 they received an offer to sell from their senior employees José Tron and José Leautaud. ⁶³⁵ Also Barcelonnettes, Tron and Leautaud were cosmopolitan men of their age who travelled to the United States and Europe mixing pleasure with business. ⁶³⁶ They kept up with new fashions in clothing as well as retailing structures and admired Boucicault’s Bon Marché and stores ⁶³⁴ From “El Palacio de Hierro: Que hay detrás del nombre?” A copy of this single-sheet document published probably in the 1980s was given to me by one of the two caretakers of the Archivo Palacio de Hierro and has no other citation. In François Arnaud, Anselme Charpenel, Léon Martin, André Signoret, and Elie Borel, eds., *Les Barcelonnettes au Mexique: récits et témoignages* (Barcelonnette: Sabeça de la Valeia, 1994), 28, a list of stores and addresses from 1864 confirms its existence.

⁶³⁵ From “La Historia de nuestra empresa,” a three-page document from the APH under similar circumstances to the footnote above.

⁶³⁶ Elite Barcelonnettes travelled regularly, especially during the last half of the Porfiriato. Many maintained homes in Mexico but I suspect many others followed Julio Tron of the Palacio who lived with his family in a

hotel while in Mexico City. See *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 10, 1898, 2, announcing the return from Europe of Tron and his family to the Hotel Sanze.

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such as Marshall Field's in Chicago. Over the next decade they planned the expansion of their store.

They recognized the limitations of their market, both in terms of disposable income and population; in 1892 Mexico City housed a mere 330,000 souls⁶³⁷ while Paris exceeded 1.5 million residents by the 1870s. ⁶³⁸ Raising capital would also be difficult as the limited liability corporation did not exist in the Mexican commercial code at this time. Nonetheless in 1888 they bought land down the street from their current store. Located on the northwest corner of San Bernardo and the Callejuela, the plot covered a modest 25 square meters⁶³⁹ or just over 5600 square feet and backed up against the Ayuntamiento (City Hall) building that faced onto the Zócalo.

Construction commenced the same year. Architectural plans came from Paris while a Mexican architect directed the project. Using Gustave Eiffel's Bon Marché as their inspiration they employed an iron framework instead of traditional concrete. ⁶⁴⁰ The exponentially-increased load-bearing capacity of iron allowed the owners to parlay a framework of thin iron columns into a more spacious, airy interior in which large quantities of goods could be displayed to an equally sizeable clientele. The dispensing of interior load-bearing walls was truly revolutionary. It also permitted Tron and Leautaud to maximize costly land prices by expanding vertically. The building stretched to an unprecedented five storeys that towered over the Ayuntamiento building. The iron came from the Paris foundry 637 Émile Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique* (Paris: Plon, Nourrit, et Cie, 1892), 249. In 1895 the population for the city was estimated between 330,000 and 340,000 with the whole federal district with just under 450,000. These sources come from Moisés González Navarro, *Estadísticas*

sociales del Porfiriato, 1877-1910 (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1956), 7; and *Estadísticas históricas de México* (Mexico City: INEGI, 1984), 32

638 Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 189-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 35.

639 “La Historia de Nuestra Empresa,” 1.

640 Patrice Gouy, *Pérégrinations des Barcelonettes au Mexique* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1980), 61.

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at Moisan while granite stones from the Chiluca quarry covered the store façades. [641](#) Popular legend holds that the daily crowds of onlookers at the site, not knowing its purpose, dubbed it

“El Palacio de Hierro” or “The Iron Palace.” The street *chisme* held and the owners adopted it in place of the original “Fábricas de Francia.” [642](#) Totalling 25,000 square feet, the Palacio already exceeded the 20,000 square feet later constructed in 1900 by Casa Boker, the largest of the German hardware/department stores. [643](#)

Within a decade the Palacio began a string of expansion projects. By the late 1890s sufficient success combined with competition from the enlarged Puerto de Veracruz (1897) and Puerto de Liverpool (1898) compelled the ownership to expand. In 1898 they became the first commercial house in Mexico to incorporate, changing from J. Tron y Compañía (Cia.) to “El Palacio de Hierro, S.A.”, raised a staggering capital of four million pesos, and purchased neighbouring properties. [644](#) The new building more than doubled in size to over 50,000 square feet and stretched the full length of the block on San Bernardo. [645](#) It completely dwarfed City Hall. Then, in

1900 the Board approved the purchase of land and construction of a workshop several blocks South on Monterilla Street, now 5 de Febrero street. Nearly 25,000 square metres, or 225,000 square feet in size, the shop employed approximately 600 workers, mostly female, who produced articles of high demand such as shirts, umbrellas, and furniture. [646](#) A smaller, yet symbolically significant expansion occurred in 1905. In a vivid demonstration of the ascent of commercial interests and the [641](#) *Ibid.*

[642](#) “El Palacio de Hierro: Que hay detrás del nombre?”

[643](#) Jurgen Buchenau, *Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865-Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 62.

[644](#) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Apr. 8, 1898, 3; Apr. 14, 1898, 3.

[645](#) Maurice Proal and Pierre Martin Charpenel, *L’Empire des Barcelonnettes au Mexique* (Marseille: Editions Jeanne Laffitte, 1986), 35.

[646](#) *Ibid.*, 35; Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 59; John Lear, “Mexico City: Popular Classes and Revolutionary Politics,” in *Cities of Hope: People, Protests, and Progress in Urbanizing Latin America, 1870-1930*, eds. Ronn Pineo and James A. Baer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 74-75.

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political weakness of the Ayuntamiento (which in 1903 had lost all authority to the governor of the Federal District)[647](#) the Palacio sought to expand back into the building that housed the city government. In September of 1905 Henri Tron confidently wrote Finance Minister Limantour asking to set up a meeting to discuss the issue which had recently been passed on to him by the Secretaría de Gobernación. [648](#) Tron succeeded and soon workers tore down the rear portion of the Ayuntamiento in preparation for the Palacio expansion. Four years later, in

1909, the Palacio opened across the street their “Annex”—which featured the first basement in a Mexico City business house—which housed their Furniture and Home Furnishings (*Tapiceria*) departments. Meanwhile, in preparations for their final expansion of the Porfiriato, the Board arranged for the purchase of its neighbour and competitor, El Importador, and began enlarging and remodelling the original building which concluded with much fanfare in the grand reopening inauguration of 1911.

Tron and Leautaud realized that what distinguished department stores from the preceding retailing structures was the context in which they placed the goods of modern society. They used the visual appeal and vast space of this revolutionary purpose-built building as their platform to develop fully the display and marketing strategies previously restrained by the spatial limitations of available retail structures. They highly publicized the high volume, low-margin sales model with their slogan of “Bueno, Barato, y Bonito,” loosely translated as “Good, Cheap, and Beautiful.” [649](#) The Puerto de Veracruz soon adopted a 647 Ariel Rodríguez Kuri, *La Experiencia Olvidada. El Ayuntamiento de México: política y gobierno, 1876-1912*

(Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1996). Specifically, see pages 51-80.

648 Henri Tron to JYL, Sept. 27, 1905, Mexico City, CDLIV 1905, Roll 36, Carpeta 22, Archivo José Yves Limantour, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México CONDUMEX, Mexico City. Hereafter cited as JYL-CONDUMEX.

649 J. Figueroa Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: Ramón de S. N. Araluce, 1899), 261.

similar slogan of “Sell Cheap to Sell Often.” [650](#) The design of the store allowed them to maximize the use of show windows, seasonal expositions,

colour, and natural and artificial light. Although earlier stores had claimed to have instituted a “department system” the Palacio possessed the room to separate distinctly the various categories of goods. Each passing year brought heavier advertising in the commercial press and elsewhere and the institution of regular sales.

The instant success of the Palacio sparked a department store construction boom which transformed the skyline of downtown Mexico City. ⁶⁵¹ They towered over neighbours in a city dominated by two-storey and the occasional three-story structures. Whether the five storeys of the Palacio and Fábricas Universales or the four of the Puerto de Liverpool, Puerto de Veracruz, or the Ciudad de Londres, department stores stretched the city vertically in ways only achieved previously by Cathedrals and churches. They expanded previous conventions of commercial space horizontally as well as vertically, stretching whole blocks in the case of the Centro Mercantil, Fábricas Universales, and the later Palacios. More than just massive they were elegant. Equally impressive was their distinctiveness; each possessed an easily identifiable style that became a landmark not only on the streets of the city but also in newspaper publicity that often paired text advertisements with a visual of the store itself.

Unlike earlier stores, the building itself now became an attraction.

Leading retail establishments were evolving into showcases of the technological prowess and material achievements of modern society and industry. Besides their size and ability to move goods in mass quantities, they shared a number of parallels with the model 650 *El Imparcial*, July 3, 1899, 4. “*Vender Barato Para Vender Mucho.*”

⁶⁵¹ *Álbum Oficial del Comité Nacional del Comercio: Premier Centenario de la Independencia de México, 1810-1910* (Mexico City: n.p., 1910), n.p. The introductory editorial section is paginated (12 pages) but the subsequent 200 pages (approximately) of photographs are not.

factories of the age. Externally, the most obvious feature was the public clock. The Palacio de Hierro and the jeweller “La Esmeralda” possessed the largest, located at the top of their corner turrets. These clocks joined those of the Buen Tono factory and other leading industrial plants along with dozens in town plazas in strikingly expressing the importance of time discipline in the culture of capitalism. ⁶⁵² Of course, the Palacio’s did not advise consumers of their “punching in” time but did help orient them to tram schedules, social engagements, business meetings and a myriad of other episodes of daily life increasingly bound by the tyranny of the clock. Inside the stores customers encountered dazzling technologies such as pneumatic tube systems, elevators, in some cases escalators, water tanks, electric lights, indoor plumbing, and undoubtedly a host of other marvels. Several of these features such as indoor plumbing and electric lights helped to popularize products that would become necessities in the homes of those pursuing a modern lifestyle. ⁶⁵³ The popularity of these fixtures paled in comparison to the most commented upon attribute of department and many other stores: the exterior display windows.

Display windows and the goods behind them became both metaphors for modernization and important benchmarks of urban progress. Business owners in the central commercial district scrambled to acquire, publicize, light and decorate their street-front displays. No business could be described without a mention of its display windows. New products catered to the artistic presentation of these displays. For example, *Micro-Flora Garces* advertised its artificial flowers for “houses in which there is good taste” by touting ⁶⁵² See the ad placed by La Esmeralda owners Hauser & Zivy in *El Imparcial*, Jan. 26, 1908, 8. It lists the location and purchasers of all the public clocks that it had installed across the Republic. For the classic account of time discipline and capitalism see E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56-97.

⁶⁵³ For Porfirian home interior decoration and organization see Berta Tello Peón, “Intención decorativa en los objetos de uso cotidiano de los interiores domésticos del Porfiriato” in *El Arte y la vida cotidiana*, ed. Elena Estrada

de Gerleso (XVI coloquio internacional de historia del arte; Mexico City: UNAM Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1995).

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the appearance of its arrangements “in many of the most elegant window displays of this capital.” [654](#) By the turn of the century newspapers announced the arrival of the latest fashions or seasonal items “in the windows of the great stores of Mexico.” [655](#) From its inception the Palacio had promoted the practice of inviting customers to educate themselves through window shopping. Typical were ads such as the one from April 1892 announcing the latest arrival of silks from France, listing articles of this “most elegant and newest selection” and encouraging readers that “It is necessary to go and see our Shop windows.

Note closely the prices.” [656](#) A journalist for the monthly *Modern Mexico* typified this intertwining of consumerism, modernity, and urban renewal in the popular mindset when he bullishly observed that “All through the business center of the city houses are being repaired, renovated, and enlarged. . . . A dozen years ago there was not a plate glass window on San Francisco Street; now it is lined with them; and behind them are displayed goods from every part of the world.” [657](#)

Why were these windows such a powerful emblem of modernity? The answer lies in both the technology and process used to create them in addition to their enhancement of the visual appeal of displayed goods. Egyptians crafted opaque decorative glass before 1300

BC. Clearer glass appeared over the next millennium. [658](#) Improvements continued and by the eighteenth century pane-glass windows could be found in the shops of aristocratic *modistes in Paris*. [659](#) Not until the mid-nineteenth century, however, did the technology of [654](#) *El Entreacto*, Mar. 8, 1908, 1.

655 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 29, 1902, 3.

656 *El Tiempo Ilustrado*, April 26, 1892, 12.

657 *Modern Mexico*, Jan. 1897, 12.

658 Alan MacFarlane and Gerry Martin, *Glass: A World History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 11.

659 Jennifer Jones, “*Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Régime Paris*,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 33.

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high temperature furnaces and the use of arsenic oxide and antimony oxide become available to rid glass of carbon dioxide bubbles and create flawless sheets of glass. [660](#) In the ads of Eugenio Maillefert’s 1867 commercial directory of Mexico the display windows are large but are still of the pane-and-frame variety. [661](#) Europeans first succeeded with the technique while American firms located from New York to St. Louis lagged behind, suffering three decades of financial failure. Mexican retailers most likely imported the majority of their windows, and the directory cites a tariff of 50% on window glass. [662](#) Further on in its pages it describes the dimensions, qualities, and sources of clear glass display windows citing the best originating in England followed by Germany, France, and finally Mexico. The United States is not even mentioned. [663](#) The directory notes dimensions of 37 inches by 42 inches, probably comparable to those illustrated in the ads. American producers achieved financial and technical success around 1880. Mass-manufacturing dropped the cost of flawless plate glass by 50%. [664](#) By the mid-Porfiriato Mexican firms purchased glass from both European and American suppliers. The famous interior decorating firm of Claudio Pellandini imported from France while the firm

of E. Heuer received American products. An 1897 contract between the Palacio de Hierro department store and Heuer reveals that while windows were not cheap they were also not exorbitantly priced. Four custom-cut windows measure 10 feet by 12 feet—over triple the dimensions of those three decades earlier—cost \$330, a price 660 MacFarlane and Martin, *Glass: A World History*, 204. These new furnaces could reach temperatures of over 1500 degrees Fahrenheit. The addition of soda or potash reduced the melting point of silica to just below 900

degrees Fahrenheit.

661 Eugenio Maillefert, *Directorio del comercio Imperio Mexicano para el año de 1867* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 1992), 193, 201.

662 *Ibid.* , 147.

663 *Ibid.*, 156.

664 *Glass, Paints, Varnishes and Brushes: Their History, Manufacture and Use* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, 1923), 31.

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including tariffs, transport on the Mexican Central railroad, and all insurance in case of breakage. [665](#)

Displays became points of pride for businesses that competed for the most

“luxurious” arrangements of “the best taste” that could “call the attention of the multitude that daily flowed along the main thoroughfares.” [666](#) They sought to attract the mass of pleasure-seeking spectators and potential consumers who made up the phenomenon of the

“urban crowd.” [667](#) And they did so, spurring on perhaps one of the most popular urban entertainments of the Porfiriato: the leisure pursuit of

window shopping. L. Frank Baum, the widely acknowledged father of display window art, may not have published his magazine *Show Window* until 1897, but Barcelonnette retailers had already moved past the crude display forms of piling goods in windows as attested by the attention they received. ⁶⁶⁸ Such was the perceived and real importance of this crowd as a mass consumer market that not only did stores frequently portray it in their advertising but other consumer goods manufacturers targeted window shoppers with their own publicity campaigns. The most memorable of these was “Electric Man” of the cigarette manufacturer El Buen Tono who, in the midst of nightly crowds of window shoppers, lit up his evening wear with light bulbs spelling out the latest brands. ⁶⁶⁹ Making window shopping an evening event required joint private- and state-driven urban improvements such as electrification. Mexico City began replacing its 665 J. Tron to E. Heuer y Cia., Mexico City, April 20, 1897, Copiador 1889-1903, p. 153, Archivo Palacio de Hierro, Mexico City (hereafter cited as APH). The cost of \$330 pesos equaled roughly one year of salary for unskilled workers or beginning department store clerks in the capital, and approximately four or five months for a more senior clerk.

⁶⁶⁶ *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Nov. 3, 1901, 11.

⁶⁶⁷ Gregory Shaya has offered an important way of looking at the urban crowd, viewing it as a cultural construction of the mass commercial press and a representation of contemporary cultural concerns. Shaya,

“The *Flâneur*, the *Badaud*, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860-1910,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (February 2004): 41-77.

⁶⁶⁸ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 55-61.

⁶⁶⁹ See Chapter 1 for a fuller account of Electric Man.

turpentine and hydrogen streetlamps with electricity in the early 1880s and department stores beginning with the Palacio installed electric lights. Other cities upgraded as well, allowing families to spend their evenings strolling down city streets gazing at the latest displays. In Guadalajara by 1900, for example, one commentator described the scene outside the Nuevo Mundo department store:

Profuse electrical illumination presents the store with a magical aspect at night, when its various articles of silk, millinery, perfume, parasols, lingerie, and countless others sparkle in its displays and windows, and when the ladies and girls [*señoras y niñas*]

of Guadalajara—whose beauty and grace is famous—gather in large groups to visit that true exposition of fashion. [670](#)

Buildings and display windows were far more than repositories for goods. They vividly displayed the material abundance and leisure opportunities afforded to society by the nineteenth century progress. And, of course, they demonstrated how that good life should be lived.

Interior displays drew upon the same techniques as those used in exterior windows.

New architectural technologies converged with new attention to display to create the space and atmosphere of these establishments. The spatial and aesthetic possibilities offered by new iron frameworks (as discussed earlier) were but one innovation found in the new stores.

Eiffel's work in Paris had also paired iron with different forms of glass to maximize the use of natural light as a way to both better display goods as well as to further an illusion of space in the store. [671](#) In advertising its week-long Spring Sale, the Palacio emphasizes this point, stating that after much preparation "Newness prevails throughout. Departments have been rearranged to give us more light, more room, and to allow you to do your

shopping and sight-seeing more comfortably. When you come, visit every Department on the different floors 670 Domenech, *Guía general descriptiva*, vol. 1, 242.

671 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 42.

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and see the many beautiful novelties on the market for the first time this season.” [672](#) Plate glass display windows were only one way that the stores used glass. Stained glass windows added colour and light; perhaps the most famous specimen was that in the great hall of the Centro Mercantil that included the monogram of the store. The wooden *mostrador* gradually changed to glass through the 1890s and display cases separate from the counters became commonplace. Electric light replaced turpentine and kerosene lamps improving the light, air quality, and reducing the cleaning requirements. Incandescent lamps were quite weak at first, often 15 or 20 watts each. This helps to explain the emphasis placed by early owners on natural light. The unreliability of the Mexico City grid also compelled stores to purchase their own direct-current electrical generators to cover during frequent black- or brown-outs.

Electricity also allowed for the installation of elevators that carried both people and goods up to higher floors, although the grand staircase tended to carry most of the human traffic.

Mannequins, appearing in the early twentieth century in Mexico, were a further complement to new display techniques. [673](#)

Department stores revolutionized interior retail space not only for the display of goods but also the movement of customers. They created a new social space with their size and policies allowing free entry and browsing, a

social space privatized and constructed with *gente decente* sensibilities yet also retaining the ability to impart a *frisson* of excitement through both the crowd and the displays of goods. Although separated from the streets the stores seemed to create a new public sphere. The interior layout broke up space to create a grid system not unlike the streets outside. Significantly, in most cases the department stores ⁶⁷² *The Mexican Herald*, Mar. 11, 1906, 9.

⁶⁷³ A basic mannequin may be seen in a Ciudad de Londres ad in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, July 18, 1909, 12.; much fancier and fully fleshed-out and poised displays exhibiting the wedding *trousseaux* of an elite Porfirian woman in an undisclosed display window appears in the *Semana Ilustrada*, Jan. 14, 1910, 14.

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in Mexico did not follow the American and French retail path of leaving goods out on shelves, tables, and racks for customers to touch and feel unaided by staff. ⁶⁷⁴ In this sense they followed the British model. ⁶⁷⁵ Sales were an exception to this rule and tables were set out for crowds to battle over merchandise.

The abundant space of these new stores allowed for the first true (and much heralded) implementation of the department principle in Mexico. This meant expanded product lines and distinctly separate classifications of goods. In 1900, the Palacio boasted 74 departments, ranging from gloves, umbrellas, towels, curtains, perfumes, furniture, artificial plants and toys to articles for Church, cycling, travel, and the dining table. ⁶⁷⁶ Certain departments were undoubtedly bigger than others, but the point is that the stores were organizing, categorizing, and separating goods that both displayed the abundance of modern society as well as the modern penchant for quantification and categorization. In other words, department stores brought the bourgeois love of order and rationalization to the often chaotic display of goods typified by “backwards” retailing forms such as markets.

By no mere coincidence did the rise of department stores parallel that of museums and expositions. Hence the comments such as that in an 1889 edition of *Le Courrier du Mexique* that David Zivy's ultra-luxurious emporium of *articles de Paris*, La Parisienne (located on the trendy first block of Plateros),

“was not a store but a museum” where “one could discover a *bibelot* [knick-knack] capable of pleasing a friend, or an *objet d'art*, or buried in a corner a perfect gift for the holidays.” [677](#)

674 For open display information in the United States refer to Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters and the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

675 For mention of the British system, see Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 28. Perhaps the best way to conceive of this arrangement is to imagine the BBC comedy “Are You Being Served?” placed in a Porfirian Mexico context.

676 This number derives from a count of departments listed throughout *Grandes Almacenes de “El Palacio de Hierro” Obsequio a nuestros favorecedores. Agenda para el año 1900* (Mexico City: Tip. El Lápiz de Aguila, 1900). The Index on pages 395-399 offers a near-complete list. See Table One at the end of this chapter.

677 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 30, 1889, 7.

At the same time (and barely preceding the department store), much in vogue were

“Industrial and Commercial Museums” such as *Le Comptoir* in Mexico City owned by A.

Zaccarini. Located in the fashionable Centro, this museum displayed and sold imported goods from “top houses” in France. [678](#) International exhibitions preceded and probably inspired the department store concept. The first exhibit took place in 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London. [679](#) Commentators noted that the crowds were drawn to the abundance and spectacle of finished goods displayed in the massive glass and iron structure far more than to the machinery or displays of agricultural and mining production. The next exhibition took place in Paris in 1855. The French, whose commentators had focussed on the good taste and beauty of the goods displayed in London, emphasized the consumer over the producer categories of the exhibition. This fit with the larger French aim under Louis Bonaparte to establish Paris as the centre of European civilization and culture. Legend has it that Aristide Boucicault, then-owner of a *magasin de nouveautés* in Paris, found that he had lost his way in the middle of the Exhibition. The experience instilled not a sense of fear or confusion but enthrallment. Captivated by “the spectacle of the goods and on view and delighted in the surprises that met his every turn,” Boucicault supposedly used the encounter to imagine a new marriage of retailing and display that would lead to the construction in 1869 of his *Bon Marché*. [680](#)

Spatial abundance and categorization did not only permit the ordering of goods but also that of people. The department store may have ushered in a “democratization of luxury”

678 One ad that lists many of the French companies represented by the museum is found in the *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Oct. 20, 1890, 4.

679 For an important way of looking at the 1851 Exhibition through the eyes of consumption, gender, and different national meanings of modernity, see Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

but it also catered to—as well as reproduced—Mexican social hierarchy in its organization of interior space. The ground floor typically geared towards mass consumption with fabrics, accessories, and ready-made clothing dominating the space. In the Palacio, the second floor housed furniture until the Annex opened in 1909 as well as rugs, tapestry, umbrellas and those goods under the catch-all luxury term “*articles de Paris*.” The third floor was exclusively a feminine domain occupied by *modistes* who created outfits for Mexico’s polite society so that they could attend in style Church, horse races, banquets at the Casino Español, dances at the Club Français, Theatre at the National, or a Kermesse at the Tivoli. It also sold lingerie and—as the 1900 Almanac stated—“in a word, the feminine *toilette*.” [681](#) The fourth and fifth floors were, as mentioned earlier, housing and dining facilities for employees.

The retail policies of department stores added to their progressive image. Some were Barcelonnette policies, in force at both *almacenes de novedades* as well as *grandes almacenes*. Free entry, home delivery, and product returns [682](#) fell in this category. In-store tailoring and *couture* design with fabric bought in store had its beginnings in the earlier stores but reached a much broader clientele. [683](#)

The most revolutionary department store policy in Mexico was the implementation of fixed prices and the abolition of bargaining (*regateo*). The Palacio led the charge in 1891

while the Puerto de Veracruz did so by 1894. [684](#) Along with fixed prices came the novel [681](#) The description of each floor comes from an account of the store inauguration found in Gouy, *Pérégrinations*, 62.

682 A full description of the Palacio return policy may be read in *Agenda para el año 1900*, 4.

683 *Ibid.*, 47.

684 For both stores, *La Semana en el Hogar*, July 22, 1895, 2. See, also, the approving, if not completely gushing, article noting the retailing advances made by the Palacio in *El Tiempo Ilustrado*, Apr. 14, 1892, 16.

Strangely, the Palacio's own brief historical account ("La Historia de nuestra empresa") places 1894 as the date at which the store switched over to fixed prices.

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practice of writing the actual price on tags attached to the article. [685](#) This departed from the tradition of labelling ready-made garments and other articles not with numbers but with a series of letters. This code originated from the counter-bargaining days of the earlier *cajones de ropa* and *almacenes de novedades* when the salesclerk used the code for instructions on the range of bargaining permitted on the item. Thus later department stores and newspaper stories covering them often wrote of the consumer breakthrough achieved by "fixed prices and numbers known to the public" (*Precios fijos con numeros conocidos del publico*). [686](#)

Bargaining, of course, was the unquestioned norm prior to the first decades of the nineteenth century when the English drapers and Parisian *magasin* owners instituted the radical notion of fixed prices. Barcelonnettes did import the policy into their Mexican stores by the 1850s. [687](#) The transplant did not take as pointed out by the perception that the department stores were leading this practice four decades later. In fact, the economic inefficiencies and backwardness of the bargaining system received criticism by the business press long before and after the Palacio opened its doors. *La Semana Mercantil* and other papers such as *La Semana en el Hogar* pointed

out that the time and labour wasted on earning a few centavos more on a sale could have been used to conclude several more sales that would have earned the store higher profits in the end. They viewed the bargaining system not just as a waste of time but also as instilling distrust between buyer and seller, as the former always inflated his prices. In *Agenda para el año 1900*, 3, a lengthy explanation of store policies ensues. Under the title “General Principles of this Department Store” the *Agenda* states: “Our system of sales, marking the prices of *each merchandise* in known numbers and being INVARIABLY FIXED, has effectively contributed to the always growing reputation of this business that enjoys the reputation as the first of its class in the Republic.” As this extract suggests, the Palacio and other stores took their adoption of fixed pricing extremely seriously and promoted it as a truly progressive act, saving both time and money for consumers. The Palacio never missed the opportunity to advertise that it was the first store in the Republic to institute the policy.

686 A sample from editorials and advertisements: *La Semana en el Hogar*, July 22, 1895, 2; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 13, 1898, 3; and *El Imparcial*, Sept. 25, 1899, 4.

687 See, for example, the ad for the Galeria de Ropa Hecha on Santa Clara Street which repeats twice that its inventory (of a considerable 50,000 articles of ready-made clothing) sells at fixed prices. *El Eco Nacional*, Jan. 11, 1857, 4.

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price while the latter always offered a pittance. Each article described the social rituals—the poetry of the purchase—embedded in transactions but saw these as impediment to a progress whose time had come. [688](#) Not surprisingly, fixed prices did not plant deep roots in Mexican retailing, particularly outside of the most modern stores and even more so beyond the capital.

In 1909 the *Semana Mercantil* still railed against the minimal adoption of fixed prices and known numbers in the country and berated the enduring popularity of the “flirtation at the counter” between clerk and customer. [689](#)

One crucial exception to the modernizing rule of Mexican department stores was the policy of cash-only sales. Although central to the new retail models in Western Europe and the United States it never caught on among the Barcelonnettes. The policy of cash-only had freed early English and French retail innovators from ponderous account burdens and freed up capital to sink into new inventory at lower prices to consumers. [690](#) Mexican stores did not appear to have done this, bowing instead to the reality of Mexican society in which all levels of society relied upon credit to keep up appearances, whether aristocrats pawning the family jewels at the Monte de Piedad to cover the expenses of attending a *fiesta presidencial* [691](#) or an urban worker visiting his neighbourhood *casa de empeño* to tide him over through the expenses of Holy Week. [692](#) Evidence of department store credit extension as a norm comes from the fact that during sales events advertisements specifically stated the introduction of a cash-only policy for the duration of the occasion. [693](#) In addition, the Palacio account books noted bad customer debts (see above) and archival records of personal bankruptcies included 688 *La Semana Mercantil*, May 20, 1889, 299-300; and Jan. 29, 1894, 53-54. Also *La Semana en el Hogar*, July 22, 1895, 2.

689 *La Semana Mercantil*, Mar. 22, 1909, 155-6.

690 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 54.

691 *México Gráfico*, Nov. 25, 1888, 4.

692 Marie François, *A Culture of Everyday Credit: Housekeeping, Pawnbroking, and Governance in Mexico City, 1750-1920* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, in press).

693 *El Imparcial*, Aug. 1, 1906, 6; *Mexican Herald*, Apr. 29, 1906, 16.

debts to department stores and other major business houses that ran into the thousands of pesos. [694](#) Still unknown is whether stores extended this credit to only certain classes of customers and, if so, what the cut-off point was for that credit.

Adding to these strategies was the element of surprise and unexpectedness with which owners regaled customers. Whether distributing savings coupons, weighty almanacs, colour lithograph calendars, and a host of other *regalitos*, department stores engaged in both classic gift exchange rituals that reached back to earliest human civilization as well as the ultramodern notion of offering constant novelty to keep customers coming back for more. [695](#)

These gifts joined the usual fashion cycle, the expositions, sales, and gargantuan exhibits such as the “White Sale” described by Zola in his *Au Bonheur des Dames* in which thousands of metres of white cloth and clothing blanketed the entire store interior to promote a one-time buy of that essential component in the Victorian/Porfirian wardrobe: *ropa blanca*, or white undergarments and beddings. Zola based his writing on the famous White Sale on that mounted by Boucicault and his successors every year in late January. On sale days, revenues typically tripled. [696](#) His competitors such as the Louvre and Le Printemps used these strategies to great effect. So, too, did storeowners in America. Gifts and surprises—in a word, novelty—succeeded along with display and other marketing strategies in drawing [694](#) See Emilio Sola (Architect) to JYL, Mexico City, June 7, 1908, CDLIV 1908, Roll 55, Carp. 25, JYL-CONDUMEX; and JYL to Guillermo de Heredia (Architect), Mexico City, Nov. 5, 1909, CDLIV 1909, Roll 61, Carp. 19, JYL-CONDUMEX. Sola owed a mere \$1,700, including \$283 to the Palacio, over \$300 to jewellers, and over \$350 to clothing and crystal shops. Heredia owed over \$30,000, including \$12,000 to various banks. Of the rest he owed over \$1000 to the Puerto de Veracruz, lesser amounts to the Ciudad de Londres and the Puerto de Liverpool, and nearly \$1000 each to the jeweller La Perla and the interior decorator Claudio Pellandini.

695 On the importance of gift exchange and the distinction between materialistic values and “a materials-intensive way of life, which may use goods as means to other ends,” consult Michael Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 135-143.

696 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 62, 70-71.

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customers back to the store far more often than their “basic needs” required. Going to the store became a consuming pleasure unto itself.

More than ever before, department stores made shopping a sensual experience.

Marshalling a variety of retailing innovations that had evolved over the preceding decades in a revolutionary building the new stores provided a sensory setting to maximize the allure of its commodities. The visual appeal offered by the above techniques was, of course, predicated on an abundance of goods. [697](#) Major advances in production and transportation brought about by the Industrial Revolution in both Mexico and abroad ensured that Mexico City stores had goods to exhibit. Moreover, the rise of the readymade clothing industry allowed for the visual appeal of a variety of designs, shapes, textures, and colour. [698](#)

The importance of this last characteristic—colour—cannot be underestimated. New uses of colours revolutionized print advertising as seen in Chapter 2, and store owners used colour to great effect in such areas as the stained glass of their building. But most of all, the new science of textile dyes added a whole new dimension and depth to the world of fashion that benefited all consumers. The last half of the nineteenth century saw a revolution in the production of synthetic dyes that were cheaper, more

colourfast, and covered a far broader range of the colour spectrum than traditional organic dyes. In 1826 a German chemist created the first synthetic dye, aniline. By 1856 Henry Perkins had patented an aniline mauve, while in 1859 a French chemist discovered fuchsia that touched off a vogue of bright coloured woollens. Synthetic blacks, blues, and greens followed in the next couple of years.

697 The images of abundance and plenty in Porfirian celebrations, marketing, and department stores marks an important use of longstanding popular culture imagery by producers, merchants, and the leadership of society to legitimize and normalize the current system of economic and social organization. T. J. Jackson Lears provides a thought-provoking treatment of this subject in his *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

698 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 34, discusses the important of ready-made clothing in the rise of mass retailing. Its lower price and faster transaction time were two important qualities.

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These gains made by the application of empirical methods received another boost with the rise of organic chemistry in the late 1850s. This led to a colourfast aniline red suitable for wool and cotton in the 1870s and 1880s which destroyed the cochineal industry and drove down prices. [699](#) The conspicuous display of this new rainbow of colours on an abundance of goods powerfully conveyed an impression of an embarrassment of material riches which resonated in the popular imagination of limitless progress that gripped many transatlantic societies.

Sales were a critical element in the constant transformation and ongoing success of department store. They were very much a modern invention. Sales or price reductions had once been illegal as they undermined the guild policy of uniform pricing that served—at least in theory—to provide artisans with a respectable income befitting their skills and social station. This system began to crack in the eighteenth century and truly crumble in the nineteenth, in part due to the new retailing model of the *magasins de nouveautés* but also from guild members seeking to increase sales. ⁷⁰⁰ The 1850s saw the rise of special great sales in Paris and by the 1860s sales—often called expositions—had become “a semi-regular feature.” ⁷⁰¹ When the first publicly-advertised sale occurred in Mexico remains unclear, but by the 1890s with the department stores they became a regularly-announced feature in the press and undoubtedly beyond.

Sales served an undeniable economic and business function for stores operating on lean margins and high volumes by both injecting fresh capital and freeing up space for the 699 François Delamare and Bernard Guineau, *Colors: The Story of Dyes and Pigments*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 99-103; Stuart Robinson, *A History of Dyed Textiles* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), 33-36.

⁷⁰⁰ Cissie Fairchilds offers a portrait of this decline in “The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 228-248.

⁷⁰¹ Miller, *Bon Marché*, 27, 33.

purchase of the latest novelties. But they meant much more. They brought controlled chaos to the order of the *gente decente* shopping experience, a sense of a “store turned upside down.” They were a break in normal time or routine, a spectacle, a transition point offering an element of controlled

surprise for those living in a culture that sought ever-increasing levels of rationalization. Sales became a consumer holiday with a suspension of normal rules of retailing.

From an anthropological point of view, they brought Carnival to the world of consumption. ⁷⁰² One can see this assertion in the print advertising of sales. First, advertising images created the crowd and provided a visual text for the excitement. The Palacio proved most adept at this kind of graphic advertising. It generally followed the formula set by its image for the July sale for 1908 which displayed a diverse and considerable crowd swarming about the store. Wives and husbands, girls and boys, all were either jostling to peer into the windows or walking across the street in the foreground to do so. Mixed in with the crowd of shoppers flowing onto the street were bicycles, automobiles, carriages, and in the foreground a delivery vehicle for the store. ⁷⁰³ Two ads provide written text that encompass the suspension of normal rules and heighten a sense of excitement and anxiety by alluding to the limitations of supply (that strangely contrasted with the visual reality of material abundance displayed at these sales) and the competition with other shoppers for those scarce supplies.

The first, from the Palacio de Hierro in 1906, announces an end-of-season (*fin de estación*) ⁷⁰² Carnival and its subversive, world-inverting role enjoys a special position in cultural studies. A sampling of its evolutionary place in academic studies follows: Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1965); Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, trans. Mary Feeney (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1980); and Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁷⁰³ *El Imparcial*, Mar. 17, 1907, 6. Another image was an all-female one. The Palacio ad in *The Mexican Herald*, July 29, 1906, 13, announced a summer close-out sale. An image of well-dressed women thronging into the store sits above a list of goods and prices. Between the two a paragraph of text hypes the sale and promises more than 50% savings, extra clerks, and extra delivery wagons. Finally, it reminds customers

“Positively no goods charged at these prices.”

clearance event for fabrics, ready-made clothing, and “an infinity of other articles.” [704](#)

Promising “we will sell for less than half price” the ad continues “All articles on sale are rigorously for cash only and will not be loaned for consultation.” A list of accompanying sample prices joins an illustration of a crowd of women jamming into the front door. The second ad belongs to El Surtidor in 1904. Dangling the claim of 80% savings at this “*Gran Exposición de Barata*” the store laid down two terms of sale: one, “In order to avoid lost time for our clientele, all articles on sale will be put on tables with prices marked”; and two,

“Due to the low prices of all the merchandise . . . no samples will be given, nor will any merchandise be loaned for viewing, and we do not guarantee that stock will remain from one day to the other. All exhibited goods will be cash only.” [705](#)

These are just two ads but they illustrate regular sales strategies adopted by modern Porfirian retailers: the suspension of credit, of samples and loans; the use of tables on which to pile goods in contrast to the usual counter service; and an image of how a store and its consumers—always a crowd—would appear during a sales situation. Carnival is a time of excess in anticipation of personal denial; in a sense sales may be seen in this way, of accelerated consumption in anticipation of “regular” pricing, or perhaps instead as a convoluted way of marking scarcity—of hoarding—before the return of fat, regular abundance. These observations are tentative and serve to provoke future research and discussion. The social sciences provide little guidance on this topic; surprisingly, while anthropologists embraced the study of consumption far earlier than historians they have so far overlooked the Carnavalesque qualities of sales.

704 *El Imparcial*, Aug. 1, 1906, 6.

705 *El Imparcial*, Jan. 17, 1905, 5.

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In addition to straightforward clearance sales, stores also transformed their time and space with the use of “expositions.” The Palacio held semi-annual expositions in February or March and September or October after their equally significant semi-annual clearance sales. [706](#) The early spring exposition celebrated the arrival of summer fashion, the fall date for winter fashions. Expositions involved special decorations for the store and usually a fashion show. The 1900 Almanac noted that these allowed visitors to examine and know exactly “the latest creations in fashion.” These fashions for women arrived from France, the center of feminine luxury. Male fashions came from England. [707](#) The Almanac continued that while these were the big events of the year “with each steamship arrival we bring to you the novelties that arise over the course of the year, all of which makes EL PALACIO DE

HIERRO the center of Parisian Fashion.”

The Palacio did not hold a monopoly on expositions, nor did clothing. The Puerto de Veracruz furniture and *objet d’art* exhibition of November and December 1906 is one example of this diversity. [708](#) Furthermore, it demonstrates that Porfirians paid as much attention to their home furnishings as they did to their clothing. [709](#) As the holiday season approached the Puerto de Veracruz transformed its third floor into an exposition of “French Industrial Art.” They imported a decorator from the Paris School of Arts with a knowledge [706](#) *Agenda para el año 1900*, 129.

[707](#) An example of this is José Yves Limantour dealing directly with London shops for clothing for his son. He requested catalogues and material patterns for overcoats, Eton suits, tweed suits, and other items as well as

requesting samples of material. On other occasions he sent sizing information and discussed fabrics with London tailors via mail correspondence. See the dialogue between Samuel Brothers of London and Limantour: Samuel Brothers to JYL, London, Sept. 21, 1904; and JYL to Samuel Brothers, Mexico City, Nov. 10, 1904, CDLIV 1904, Roll 29, Carp. 26, JYL-CONDUMEX.

708 The best sources are in *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 18, 1906, 3-4; and Dec. 16, 1906, 4. Also see the preparations for this event and the offer of a Parisian “expert ‘decorator’” to help arrange every room in a house in preparation for a reception, *The Mexican Herald*, July 8, 1906, 16. Four years later, in 1910, a commemorative album of the Centennial celebrations noted its special displays exhibiting furnished rooms for every part of a home: “salons, boudoirs, bedrooms, dressing rooms, libraries, smoking rooms, etc.” Eugenio Espino Barros, *Crónica Gráfica de la Ciudad de México en el Centenario de la Independencia* (Mexico City: Departamento del Distrito Federal, 1988), 60-61.

709 Tello Peón, “Intención decorativa en los objetos de uso cotidiano.”

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of “ancient and modern styles from the Byzantine and Gothic to Louis XVI and *art nouveau*”

with the object of transforming the store interior space into a showcase of ready-to-buy room sets. The store advertised that customers who have visited Paris will be transported back to the galleries of the great stores of Paris such as the Bon Marché and the Louvre. Imported furniture, rugs, and artwork served to compose bedrooms, dining rooms, and games rooms among others. The store offered fixed prices for the sets with the option of picking out bronzes and other fashion accessories *à la carte* with fashion assistance from employees. At least four bedroom displays ranged in price from \$3,000 pesos down to \$875 (the *Salon Doré Louis XV*) suitable for

different members of the family such as the *Laquée de Blance* style created with a young girl or lady in mind (\$1,400). The Louis XVI ensemble was described as “two tonnes of perfect taste” and included a bed, two night tables, one toilette table, and an armoire with three doors featuring one large panel of glass and two smaller lateral panels.

One article, touching on the department store trademark of affordable luxury, commented that “despite its fineness and elegance the set price is a very modest \$1,600.” Appealing to the power of emulative consumption the articles mentioned that several sets of the Louis XVI bedroom—which had won first prize for artistic value at the Lyon Exposition—had been purchased on the first day of its installation “by persons of the best taste” and that “two of our best clients” had already acquired two pairs of marble and bronze statues valued at \$2,800 and inspired by a set found in the Louvre museum. Just so readers who had missed these fine specimens could see what their betters had bought, the store promised an exposition of similar art for ten days only starting on December 20. In reality, most Mexicans could not afford this furniture but keep in mind this was imported furniture that cost considerably more than quite decent domestic manufactures produced by the Palacio de 251

Hierro and Jorge de Unna (located in San Luis Potosí but marketed in the Capital) often in American or French styles that offered attainable prices for the respectable classes of the Republic. [710](#) Finally, in a display of the fairly sophisticated marketing strategies and

“synergies” pursued by leading Porfirian retailers—and a reminder of the close relationship between advertisers and the Porfirian press mentioned in Chapter 2—in the same newspaper edition carrying articles describing the exposition the Puerto de Veracruz bought full-page advertisements describing the store, the art, and the entertainment inside. [711](#)

Stepping back for a moment, consider the significance of packaged, ready-to-buy room sets. It radically departs from the tradition of decorators customizing furniture to the interior space of each home. It also relieved the house-wife of the burden—or challenge—of selecting a decoration scheme

for the home in her charge. Nevertheless, the aristocracy and elite of the capital would probably not be caught dead buying “two tonnes of perfect taste” so who did this selection, arrangement, and display of domestic scenes really appeal to? It undoubtedly targeted the *nouveau riche* who were rich in cash but poor in cultural capital.

Ready-made interiors facilitated the acquisition of respectability for this group who may have felt uncomfortable demonstrating their lack of education to interior designers catering to the elite. But beyond appealing to a clientele who could purchase these ensembles, these displays attracted the less financially-endowed members of the *gente decente*. For them, these displays offered an aspirational allure, an image of how they *should* live, a glimpse inside the houses of their social superiors that remained closed to them.

710 For an account of furniture and its cost at the Palacio, see *El Imparcial*, Oct. 13, 1903, 2. Jorge Unna regularly placed full-page ads. He effectively combined photos of his furniture and letters from government ministries thanking him for the tasteful furnishing of their offices. One example is that from the Secretaria de Justicia é Instrucción Pública describing the Luis XIV style used in the reception room as “elegant,” “in good taste,” and “equalling the best foreign work.” For this see *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Jan. 25, 1903, 20. Also note from the same weekly review May 20, 1900, 14; July 8, 1900, 14; and Aug. 26, 1900, 14.

711 See *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Nov. 18, 1906, 8.

Clearly, department stores were far more than economic institutions. Their organization, events, policies, and displays were cultural primers for Porfirian society.

Department stores offer a window on how business and non-state institutions disseminated the idea of modernity and development to a broad swath of Mexican society. They sold more than goods: they sold a lifestyle. As Michael Miller observed in Paris, this lifestyle was an idealized one: “How the bourgeoisie like to conceive of their lives, what they expected of their lives, the minimum baggage they felt they could carry along with them in their lives all comes into focus in the pages and pictures of the Bon Marché.” [712](#) Adding another level of complexity in Mexico and other “peripheral” nations was the fact that this image of modernity was an imported one that must be reconciled and fitted within a Mexican reality.

Critically, department stores were not just mere reflections of *gente decente* values but also centres of *gente decente* cultural production. They made the *gente decente* worldview material in the architecture, inventory, displays, and in the pages of their seasonal catalogues and annual agendas.

Agendas and catalogues vividly illustrated Mexican *gente decente* culture during the Porfiriato. Their pages unify written and visual texts that present an idealized society of respectability, order, and progress centered on the family and its life and social rituals. They address the wife as the head of household consumption and management and the family agent in a relationship with the store. While they reflect a *gente decente* self-image they also create that image. In their pages they construct a family of leisure segregated from work.

Departments appear solely for these bourgeois leisure pursuits, offering parlour games, beach gear, travelling equipment, cycling wear and other activities. Inside the home, rooms must possess a certain amount and type of furniture and decoration while meals must be served at 712 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 180.

the proper tables with correct silverware. Family members must not only be clothed, but provisioned with the right attire for every occasion. Clothing for making and receiving social visits, church, shopping, tea, Sunday *paseos*, and evening strolls coordinated with attire specifically for morning, afternoon, dinner, evening, and bedtime. Children were not exempt from this and boys in Porfirian Mexico were often dressed in the sailor suits so in vogue in France and England. [713](#) Department store agendas and catalogues covered every aspect of life, addressing the needs of newborns, children, schooling, *quinceñeras*, and most definitely marriage. One of the larger store departments was that of *trousseaux*, or the collection of clothing, lingerie, china and other accessories prepared for a wedding day, night, and beyond.

Usually these were gifts from the bridegroom to the bride (with an emphasis on slinky attire and material for the *sábana santa*—the much-giggled-at sheet to prove virginity and demonstrate consummation) but the Palacio packages include such a variety of goods as to suggest it was more of a kit for setting up a home. In any case, Porfirian society turned what was once a fairly simple affair into a much-feared financial burden. A selection of *trousseaux* sets in an early twentieth-century Palacio catalogue notes anywhere from four to seven categories including wedding attire and accessories, lingerie, menswear, dinnerware, and house attire. [714](#) The catalogue offered five different packages beginning near \$1,000 and ending at \$3,000.

The almanacs and catalogues —like the goods depicted on their pages— were shipped throughout the Republic. They reached their destination by mail or via a network of 713 An example of this dreadful image can be seen in an ad for the Puerto de Veracruz in *The Mexican Herald*, Jan. 14, 1906, 4. See also *México, ¿quieres tomarte una foto conmigo? Cien años de consumo* (Mexico City: PROFECO/Editorial Gustavo Casasola, 1996), 83-84.

714 Palacio de Hierro catalogue for 1906(?), pages 3-9. A catalogue for a store specializing in weddings is *Le Trousseau: Gran Casa de Modas y Artículos de Lujo para Señora*, owned by Victoria A. de Villa (Amador

Trade Catalog Collection, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico). This catalogue, addressed to gentlemen, stays closer to traditional bridegroom-to-bride gift arrangement. It included only women's clothing and accessories, all made in France.

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travelling salesmen and commission agents. Inspired by the agendas of the Bon Marché and the catalogues of Sears-Roebuck, they found ready adoption in Mexico not just by Barcelonnette department store owners but also by the Casa Boker hardware, the *Imparcial* newspaper, and the Buen Tono cigarette company. Agendas were modified almanacs whose history precedes the Porfiriato by centuries, but it is during this time that the first commercial almanacs and agendas appeared and rapidly disseminated. [715](#)

The Palacio published the largest and most widely distributed agenda. For 1900 it weighed in at 401 pages with a five page index broken into almost a dozen sections. [716](#) The store distributed them free of charge as Christmas gifts to its customers in December and early January. What set the agenda apart from others was its sheer size, the scope of its information, and that unlike the publications of Buen Tono and *El Imparcial* it was intended for matrons of the middle class. Interspersed throughout its pages were descriptions of its 74

departments and other store services and benefits such as its fixed price policies and store expositions. In addition, it provided copious lists of government offices and officials, public institutions, train and tram schedules, mail rates and other information pertinent for personal and family negotiations of the budding local and national communication network and the enlarged role of the Porfirian state in daily life. Moreover, for the management of the home the agenda offered extensive information on the care of the family's health, clothing, and furniture as well as advice on food preparation ranging from jams to twelve-course meals that would leave one's guts groaning from excess. To help manage this domestic

economy the 715 The most famous almanac in Mexico is that of Galván. For a brief history of Agendas and Almanacs in France, see Miller, *Bon Marché*, 187-189.

716 *Grandes Almacenes de “El Palacio de Hierro” Obsequio a nuestros favorecedores. Agenda para el año 1900* (Mexico City: Tip. El Lápiz de Aguila, 1900). Other department stores undoubtedly followed, but when I cannot say with certainty. By 1908 Fábricas Universales offered one (*Le Courrier du Mexique*, Jan. 3, 1908, 2).

The Puerto de Veracruz continued to offer through 1904, at least, a calendar and aluminum ashtray as Christmas gifts for its customers (*El Imparcial*, Jan. 17, 1904, 4).

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agenda provided helpful tools, including daily planners, daily expense lists, and tables for calculating the payment of domestic servants and laundresses. To uplift, educate, and entertain in line with Porfirian standards for middle class women the agenda provided religious calendars as well as romantic or moralistic short stories and poetry by Mexican, French and Spanish authors under the heading *Agenda Recreativa*. Its *Agenda Instructiva* tables informed readers how to convert Fahrenheit to Celsius, calculate the depth of the oceans, understand the meaning of Mexican place names, and offered “For singing aficionados: some rules for pronouncing Italian.” [717718](#)

Throughout its pages this veritable “Consumer’s Bible” weaves consumption and the Palacio de Hierro into the daily fabric of the lives of its readers. Its introduction notes that

“this volume can constitute for families an album of memories, for the housewife a compendium of notes and appointments, and for the forgetful a powerful mnemonic aid.” It continues, pointing out the lined page at the

end of each month to note “the birth of a child, the day of his baptism, the date of his first communion, and his first triumphs at school. . .”

It mobilizes a discourse centred on the home, Porfirian sentimentality, and on practicality—

all cultural notions readily understood and embraced by its target audience. This discourse is epitomized at the close of its introduction: “In conclusion, we have endeavoured to compile in this book all that is related to the order of a home as well as the well-being of a family; because of this we invite all the clients of ‘El Palacio de Hierro’ to make frequent use of this agenda who utility is endless.” [719](#)

The agendas were a great vehicle for store advertising and identity. Department stores piggy-backed on the popularity of almanacs in Mexico and guaranteed themselves a 717 The locations of these specific headings topics for the *Agenda Instructiva* are *Agenda*, 214, 315, and 350.

718 The location of these specific topics for the *Agenda Instructiva* are *Agenda*, 214, 315, and 350.

719 *Ibid.*, 1.

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wide market for this kind of publicity. At the same time the agenda helped to identify the Palacio as part of the *gente decente* way of life. By pairing the store with so many institutions and activities it presented itself as another indispensable establishment for respectable society.

The Palacio and other retailers deepened this relationship by associating themselves into the social rhythm of respectable society which, coincidentally, also happened to be moments in time of increased consumption expenditures. Stores advertised heavily during holidays such

as Christmas, Day of the Dead, New Year's, and Holy Week. By the twentieth century the Palacio was already depicting Santa Claus as the icon of Christmas for children.

In one memorable ad, Saint Nick is riding a burro carrying a *cañasta* basket full of toys while flanked and followed by throngs of neatly dressed children. [720](#) They also announced promotions and fashions for the social calendar of the Capital. These included horse races at Peralvillo, Flowery Wars during Holy Week, the *fiesta Presidenciales* commemorating the re-elections of Díaz, balls at the Casino Español, and for a number of functions coinciding with expatriate holidays such as the American July 4, the French Bastille Days, the Spanish *fiestas de Covadonga*, and an assortment of Italian, Basque, and German events. Religious events were also social events and stores advertised heavily for All Saints' Day and Day of the Dead in addition to their permanent department selling religious articles and *modistes* tailoring the latest tastes for high-society Sunday Mass at the Cathedral or La Profesa. [721](#)

720 *La Semana Ilustrada*, Dec. 24, 1909, back cover. See, also, *El Imparcial*, Dec. 16, 1907, 8, for another Palacio Christmas ad for toys featuring over 50 illustrations including tennis sets, dolls and house furnishing, gun sets, billiard sets, automobile/chauffeur/garage sets, toy pianos, and a puppet theatre featuring one character being hanged to death. Toys do tell a great deal about a society.

721 A sample: For a ball at the Casino Español (Palacio de Hierro), *El Imparcial*, Apr. 27, 1909, 8; Flower Wars (Puerto de Liverpool) *El Imparcial*, May 2, 1909, 12; the Centennial (Fábricas Universales) *The Mexican Herald*, Aug. 26, 1910, 2; American Independence (El Importador, Palacio de Hierro, Puerto de Veracruz, Ciudad de Londres) *The Mexican Herald*, July 3, 1910, 6, 7, 11, 16; and Presidential Fiestas (Puerto de Veracruz) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Dec. 30, 1900, 2.

Agendas, catalogues, and other store advertising provided a way for the *gente decente*, especially those recently arrived, to educate themselves in proper behaviour that marked them as a distinct class—the self-described class of national progress. ⁷²² These texts, like the store shelves, interweave consumption with social hierarchy and cultural differentiation. They display lower-priced or introductory-level goods that signify the minimal degree of respectability and then goods of ascending levels of prestige exhibiting for consumers the material goals to which they should aspire, material improvements that would publicly demonstrate self-improvement that made possible this social expression of personal and family progress. Definite parallels exist between the purpose of this commercial propaganda and the Manuals of Etiquette that were so popular in the nineteenth and twentieth century. These manuals, such as those of Manuel Antonio Carreño, *La condesa de Tramar*, or José Rosas Moreno instructed aspirants and recently arrived members of the *gente decente* across Latin America how to comport themselves and their families. ⁷²³ In the code of conduct and belief that they promoted—in their culture—they helped the socially insecure of post-Independence Mexico both to define themselves as members of respectable society, as citizens of the new Mexican nation-state, and to differentiate themselves from their social inferiors. The difference between these Manuals and the Agendas is that store publicity ⁷²² For just two examples of this, see the comments of Luis G. Urbina in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Dec. 9, 1906, 1, and *El Imparcial*, Oct. 22, 1907, 1, on public entertainments and the unique role of the middling classes to

“thanklessly toil toward national progress.” The newspaper *La Clase Media* offers a nonstop espousal of such a view, beginning with its first edition on June 1, 1908.

⁷²³ For information on Carreño and his *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras*, first published in 1853 and now past the 40th edition, see Arnold J. Bauer, *Goods, Power, and History: Latin America's Material Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 134-137. Also, *La condesa de Tramar*, *El trato social: Costumbres de la sociedad moderna en todas las*

circunstancia de la vida. Nueva guía de la gente elegante, traducido, anotado y adaptado á la sociedad de México con la colaboración de distinguidas damas mexicanas (Paris and Mexico City: Libreria de la Viuda de Ch. Bouret, 1906); and José Rosas Moreno, *Nuevo manual en verso de Urbanidad y Buenas Maneras* (Mexico City: Antigua Librería de Murguía, n.d.). These are just a few of the many manuals in circulation at this time.

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identified and injected these developmentalist values into the goods by which the *gente decente* defined themselves both individually and as a class.

Department store philanthropy and holiday participation further reinforced their position as a modernizing *gente decente* institution. Beyond their usual cultivation of benevolence in providing gifts to customers and benefits to workers the stores engaged in highly publicized charity works. One example was a banquet for the poor at which the Palacio de Hierro and the Centro Mercantil joined tobacco companies and major newspapers in donating money and staff towards a feast for several hundred of the capital city's destitute. [724](#) Store owners, as leading members of the community, shared the sense of *noblesse oblige* held by elite and respectable society toward their social inferiors. In addition, as citizens of the most cultured nation of the world, Barcelonnette owners compounded this sentiment with a powerful faith in their civilizing mission towards less-developed peoples.

The placement of the stores in the downtown core between the Zócalo and Alameda Park ensured them a high degree of exposure during parades and other public festivals.

National and political holidays such as Independence Day, the birthdays of Juarez and Díaz, and the quadrennial *fiestas presidenciales* (commemorating the re-election of Díaz) were among those which afforded department stores the opportunity to express their patriotism and

progressive spirit. [725](#) Owners adapted their display techniques for goods to that of the stores themselves. Store façades completely transformed under banners, lights, and other decorations dependent on the event celebrated. Store goods added to the effect, such as the 724 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 27, 1907, 3.

725 For example, *El Imparcial*, Sept. 16, 1899, 1-2; *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Jan. 13, 1901, 4-5; and Sept. 21, 1902, 5-6.

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draping of enormous Oriental rugs from upper floor balconies. [726](#) Display windows changed their educational function as images of Porfirian political mythmaking (paintings of patriotic heroes and other paraphernalia) replace garments and other goods as the desired objects of public consumption. In addition department stores entered the most magnificently decorated allegorical cars in patriotic and other parades (such as the Flower War during Holy Week) which drew rave reviews from journalists. Finally, stores dressed up, advertised heavily, and offered major sales during holidays celebrated by the foreign colonies. [727](#) As French-owned enterprises the Bastille Day festivities on July 14 received particular attention as stores contributed not only money for the event organization but also an abundance of merchandise for the French community's charity auctions. [728](#) They typically displayed these donations in their show windows for weeks in advance. [729](#)

In their prominent public role—whether in the streets, in their advertising messages, in their transformation of urban architecture, or in their infusing of retailing customs with *gente decente* values we see how these stores were the latest stage of a historic process in Mexico: the fight over social space and dominant cultural values that reached back to the colonial period. This struggle found expression in continuous urban transformation and renewal

projects undertaken in the capital that had the cumulative effect of ushering in an increasingly secular and commercial city conducive to the consumer culture represented by 726 In particular, see *El Tiempo Ilustrado*, May 4, 1903, 210-211. For the Fiesta Floral, or Flower War, The Surtidor store draped flowers and Persian rugs over its second and fourth floor railings along with an enormous banner above that announced “THE BEST SELECTION OF RUGS AND TAPESTRIES IN THE CAPITAL.”

727 For American Independence (El Importador, Palacio de Hierro, Puerto de Veracruz, Ciudad de Londres) *The Mexican Herald*, July 3, 1910, 6, 7, 11, 16; Spanish *fiestas de Covadonga*, *El Imparcial*, Sept. 9, 1904, 1.

728 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, July 16, 1899, 2; *El Imparcial* July 15, 1899, 1; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, July 15, 1900, 2.

729 For a chronological range of this practice, consult *Le Courrier du Mexique*, July 9, 1888, 3, and *Le Courrier du Mexique*, July 19, 1908, 2.

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department stores. Again, if we accept an anthropological conception of the city as a production of social and political goals and Sam Bass Warner’s thesis that urban dwellers construct their city in competing “multiple urban images” then the agency of commercial interests in the shaping of urban areas deserves consideration as much as the State, popular organizations, and other historical actors. [730](#)

In its orderly, spacious, hygienic and well-illuminated ideal, the department store offered an idealized capsule of the well-regulated city and society pursued since the colonial period. The city has always played an important cultural role in Iberian society, perceived not merely as a market place and a concentration of political, economic, and religious power but also as an

island of civilization and—by the mid-nineteenth century—modernity in a sea of rural barbarism. [731](#) Attempts to civilize, modernize, and hopefully assimilate or at least control rural migrants entering the city have a long history in Mexico. They took on heightened importance during the Porfiriato because of the accelerated urban migration caused by a number of push-pull variables ranging from Porfirian land policies favouring large economic interests over those of small communities to the promise of jobs and excitement offered by the city. [732](#)

730 See Chapter Two. Sam Bass Warner, “Slums and Skyscrapers: Urban Images, Symbols, and Ideology,” in *Cities of the Mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences*, ed. L. Rodwin and R. Hollister (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), 183. This, along with the idea of the city as a cultural creation, is cited in Daniel R.

Brower, *The Russian City between Tradition and Modernity, 1850-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 2.

731 Domingo Sarmiento, *Facundo: Or, Civilization and Barbarism*, trans. Mary Peabody Mann (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). First published in 1845. For the impact of Sarmiento and his views on the making of Argentina (and for a taste of similar intellectual currents throughout Latin America during the nineteenth century) see Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially pages 130-140. For a fine synopsis of the meaning of the city in colonial Latin America see Bauer, *Goods, Power, and History*, 58-63.

732 Sources on this issue are many. Here are two: Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 78-170; William E. French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). For the allure of the city on small town Porfirians, see Luís González, *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, trans. John Upton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), 96-102.

The Bourbons had made the first concerted and sustained attempts to transform the physical and behavioural landscape of the capital to mirror Enlightenment ideals of order and rationality. [733](#) Viceroy Bucareli's creation of the Paseo Bucareli or his remodelling of the Alameda Park into its distinctive diagonal and cross pattern as a suitable place of leisure for respectable residents matched other Bourbon reforms such as the institution of administrative *arrondissements* and ordinances for clear signs at street corners and on commercial establishments. [734](#) Campaigns to transform the moral matched the physical as prohibitions on popular recreations, behaviours, and vices sought to clear an orderly public space for respectable society. [735](#) During the Early Republic an empty treasury combined with civil and political disorder blocked any serious urban renewal programs but efforts to control public space and popular behaviour mounted. [736](#)

It is the liberalizing economic changes of the Juárez regime during the War of the Reform in the 1850s that literally created an opening for commerce and private capital to transform the face of the city. In particular, the secular vengeance of the Ley Lerdo accelerated the physical transformation of the city. Convents and churches lost portions or [733](#) Although the Hapsburg period was not completely devoid of such efforts, officials sought public support for their rule through policies favourable towards popular culture and society. For an illustration of the sharp distinction in ruling philosophies between Hapsburg and Bourbon officials see Linda Ann Curcio, *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994); and Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, "Giants and Gypsies: Corpus Christi in Colonial Mexico City," in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, eds. William H.

Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 1-26.

734 Juan Pedro Viquiera Albán, *¿Relajados o Reprimidos? Diversiones públicas y vida social en la ciudad de México durante el Siglo de las Luces* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), 229.

735 Viquiera Albán, *¿Relajados o Reprimidos?* stands out as a classic text on this subject. See also Curcio, *Great Festivals*, as well as Clara García Ayluardo, “A World of Images: Cult, Ritual, and Society in Colonial Mexico City,” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, eds. William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 77-94.

736 Anne Staples, “Policia y Buen Gobierno: Municipal Efforts to Regulate Public Behavior, 1821-1857,” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, eds. William H.

Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 115-126.

Shannon Baker Tuller, “Santa Anna’s Legacy: Caudillismo in Early Republican Mexico (Antonio López de Santa Anna)” (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1999).

all of their land in the name of straightening or widening central avenues⁷³⁷ to match the urban reform projects that had already occurred in 1830s Newcastle⁷³⁸ or were contemporaneously pursued in Haussman’s Paris of the 1850s. While originally undertaken partly to inscribe Liberal cultural values upon the city as well as to increase the State’s capacity for public vigilance (or to make it harder for the rabble to erect barricades in

the case of Paris after 1848) these changes generated considerable commercial benefits. A still small yet burgeoning affluent class (benefiting in a variety of ways from the sale and development of once economically-dormant ecclesiastical lands) flocked to the cafes, theatres, and stores slowly establishing along these new boulevards. Continuing economic and political instability acted as a drag on this development in Mexico City but considerable physical changes still took place. Importantly, the French Intervention and installation of Maximilian by Conservatives did little to slow these changes as demonstrated by the laying of the Paseo de la Reforma. ⁷³⁹ These actions set the stage for the ascent of a secular and commercial urban society that germinated during the Reforma, Intervention, and Restored Republic before blossoming during the Porfiriato.

Curiously, the historiography of the period has overlooked the impact of business architecture in favour of that of the State. A great deal of excellent work has analyzed the imprint of the modernizing State on the physical transformation of the city: drainage works, electrification and illumination, street and sidewalk paving and widening, and the erection of 737 For a visual tour of the losses suffered by ecclesiastical properties in the name of urban development, see Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, *La Ciudad de los Palacios: crónica de un patrimonio perdido*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Vuelta, 1992). For the scope of the transformation, note the map on Page 6.

738 On the comprehensive planning and redevelopment of downtown Newcastle, see Lancaster, *Department Store*, 8.

739 Barbara Tenenbaum, “Streetwise History: The Paseo de la Reforma and the Porfirian State, 1876-1910,” in Beezley, Martin, and French, eds., *Rituals of Rule*, 127-151, esp. 128-129.

public monuments. [740](#) An equally rich parallel vein of research has shown the ongoing Porfirian regulation of behaviour and morality, of the pragmatic spatial marginalization of such enduring popular mores and modes of life.

[741](#)

Yet in focusing on the rise of the centralizing State historians have missed the role of commercial architecture in expanding and solidifying an urban social space for the gente decente. Department, jewelry, and hardware stores along with insurance and other companies commissioned purpose-built buildings which became landmarks in the Capital for foreigners and residents alike and a testament to the triumph of the Porfirian policy of trade liberalism, economic *laissez-faire*, and social order. Unlike in the colonial and Early Republic periods, the once-dominant architecture of Church and State gave way to the preeminence of the architecture of commercial capitalism. In 1891, while the Palacio de Hierro was under construction, many thought that its size and novel iron-girder framework signalled that it must be a new cathedral or palace. A year later, in his *Practical Guide of the City and Valley of Mexico*, Emil Riedel noted that the five-storey Palacio de Hierro loomed over the City Hall as “Mexico’s highest building” and that already “little shops have given way to luxurious modern stores such as this one.” [742](#)

740 Among the many: Tenenbaum, “Streetwise History”; William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); Steven B. Bunker,

“‘Consumers of Good Taste:’ Marketing Modernity in Northern Mexico, 1890-1910,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 227-269; Sandra Kuntz Ficker and Priscilla Connolly, coords., *Ferrocarriles y Obras Públicas* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 1992).

741 On the regulation of morality, a moral geography of vice, and its importance in defining citizenship in modern Mexico, see French, *A Peaceful and Working People*; Robert M. Buffington and William E. French,

“The Culture of Modernity,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Pablo Piccato, *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931*

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Robert Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

742 Emil Riedel, *Practical Guide of the City and Valley of Mexico with Excursions to Toluca, Tula, Pachuca, Puebla, Cuernavaca, etc.* (Mexico City: I. Epstein, 1892), 178, 185.

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Photographs of downtown Mexico City wordlessly record this transformation. First, consider the change in the appearance of the Portal de las Flores, [743](#) one of the city’s most important shopping zones from colonial times up through most of the Porfiriato. In a photo from 1855 the two-storey arcade buildings look uniformly dingy with a single, impossible-to-read sign hanging over one of the Portals. Thin shoots of trees line the walkways that converged on the kiosk in the centre of the Plaza, a beautification project with unsure success achieved sometime after the destruction of the Parián market in 1843 by Santa Anna.

Overall, not a promising sight for the centre of national political, religious, and commercial power. Twenty-five years later the trees are tall and lush; public lighting illuminates the kiosk and walkways. The transformation of the Portal is even more remarkable. Given that Díaz had just turned over the presidency to Manuel González after a mere four years in power, the commercial development of the arcade clearly pre-dates the “Porfirian Miracle.”

Now, different coloured paint along with large, clear signs differentiates each of the clothing and accessories stores (*almacenes de novedades*) that monopolize the Portal. The stores have grown, with most of the stretch now

sporting a third floor level. Claims of department store status and cachet advertised by the title *grandes almacenes* reach out to customers from Sebastian Robert's La Valenciana that spans four of the arches along the arcade. Equally large are those of his French compatriots in La Ciudad de México and El Correo Francés that dominated the Portal de las Flores while Al Progreso of Michel Bellon, located between Las Fábricas de Francia on the corner of Callejuela and La Valenciana, breaks the uniformity of this vertical expansion. Emile Chabrand in 1892 confirmed this Gallic influence as he 743 Today the Portal de las Flores has given way to the offices of the Department of the Federal District (DDF) as well as the widening of the Callejuela, now named 20 de Noviembre, a project with took place in the 1930s.

Tovar de Teresa, *Ciudad de los Palacios*, vol. 2, 109-112.

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observed the near exclusivity of Barcelonnette (French) ownership of the Portal shops. [744](#)

Two other stores complete the Portal: La Colmena—cut off by the photo at the eastern corner—and the other's sign illegible in the photo that appears to be taken from the top of the National Cathedral. [745](#)

The second nominee for considering the change in commercial structures and prominence belongs to the Puerto de Liverpool store over a span of almost forty years. The first image is a drawing from 1860. [746](#) A small, adobe, one-storey corner building with recessed doors and windows reminds one of the architecture common in small-town Mexican shops today. At this point it is nothing more than a *cajón de ropa* but still commands a clientele derived from the better classes of Mexico City society. The next image is a photo taken in 1872. [747](#) Still at the corner of Callejuela and San Bernardo the store has modernized with a large store sign with raised lettering. Underneath the sign, pane-glass windows allow

for display while an awning helps protect goods and window shoppers from the sun and refuge from rainy season downpours. The third and final image comes from the late 1890s when the Puerto de Liverpool under the ownership of Ebrard and Fortolis transform their establishment into a true department store by moving into a new, four-storey purpose-built structure. [748](#)

These time-lapse accounts represent a broad and insistent trend in urban Mexico.

Their images reveal the gradual yet increasing strength, vitality, and importance of retailing and consumption in capitalino life and culture. As a final note, consider the architectural 744 Chabrand, *De Barcelonnette au Mexique*, 375.

745 Tovar de Teresa, *La Ciudad de los Palacios*, vol. 2, 40-41. A petition to the Ayuntamiento in 1885 by the merchants of the Portal confirms this French dominance. See Gregorio Llacuria and 5 others (all French) to Juan Bribiesca (Comisión de Hacienda y Mercados), Dec. 21, 1885, Exp. 50, Portales 1559-1918, Tomo I, Archivos de ex-Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México (hereafter cited as the AACM).

746 Anilú Elías, *150 años de costumbres, modas y Liverpool* (Mexico City: El Puerto de Liverpool, 1997), 42.

747 *Ibid.*, 63.

748 *Ibid.*, 68.

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contributions from different historical eras on Mexico City. From the colonial period remain religious structures, palatial residences, and institutions of the state. Porfirian contributions from the Church are

negligible, while the State counts an assortment of monuments and a few buildings such as the Post Office and the Bellas Artes. What continues to define the urban core of the city are the commercial buildings that remain from the age of Díaz. Some continue in their original function, such as the Palacio de Hierro and the Puerto de Liverpool, while others have changed not only owners but businesses, such as the bottom floor of Casa Boker now a Sanborns restaurant and the building for the life insurance company La Mutua now a record store. Also remaining are architectural gems of the Esmeralda jewelry store, the Centro Mercantil, the Fábricas de Francia, and the Puerto de Veracruz among others.

Strolling through downtown Mexico City between the Zócalo and Alameda Park one cannot help but experience an aesthetic *frisson* from the architectural beauty handed down from the Porfiriato. For all its faults, the Porfirian *gente decente* achieved in their buildings the solidity and grandeur to which they aspired to as a class.

A Celebration of Certitude

By 1910 the Barcelonnette owners of Mexico's department stores had plenty of reason to see themselves in a positive light. They saw themselves as they saw their stores: as powerful modernizing and civilizing agents in the Republic. They had just ridden out the worst of the 1907 Depression and were gearing up for the Centennial celebrations that would showcase the modernizing advances achieved by the Porfirian State and its pro-business policies. Through their stewardship of textile production and dry goods retailing they had assisted greatly in expanding the historically weak domestic market. To many, the 267

department store had fulfilled the Porfirian motto of Order and Progress, a perfect wedding of economic and cultural progress combined with a representation of a stable social hierarchy.

These icons of modernity marked the achievements and arrival of the *gente decente* in Mexico and of a global bourgeoisie more generally. They anchored and breathed new life into a sputtering urban modernization project into which the State and Business had invested so heavily. To visitors and residents alike, they demonstrated that when it came to material progress *capitalinos* were as civilized as the residents of Paris, London, New York, and other centres of modernity.

Unbeknownst to the owners the sudden collapse of the Porfirian regime was less than a year away. But the department store and the consumer world that it promoted were far more durable. They were part of a larger economic and cultural global transformation that ran much deeper than the political currents of Mexico. The stores would survive through the dual privations forced by the Mexican Revolution and World War I. They survived with adaptive strategies such as advertising and selling military uniforms to factions engaged in the national conflict⁷⁴⁹ before achieving new glories in the 1920s.

In light of their material and moralizing contributions to the Republic, should not business have its own day during the Independence celebrations? The French Chamber of Commerce in Mexico, dominated by the Barcelonnettes, thought so. They proposed the idea to the National Chamber of Commerce and passed the resolution. [750](#) After negotiations with the centennial organizers they set September 4, 1910 as the date for “*Día de Comercio*.” By 749 See the ad in *El Norte*, June 4, 1915, 4, displaying two spiffily dressed soldiers under the heading “Para Artículos Militares: La Ciudad de Londres.”

750 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, June 2, 1910, 2, states that the suggestion of the National Chamber patronizing the celebrations on their own day came from Eugène Roux, the president of the French Chamber of Commerce in Mexico.

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June the Chamber had elected the organizing committee. Presided over by Santiago Arechiderra, a Basque and member of the Centro Mercantil executive, the committee included a heavy French and Barcelonnette representation. This included members from the Palacio, Fábricas Universales, El Importador, the Puerto de Veracruz, El Paje, El Nuevo Mundo and the Puerto de Liverpool while Eugène Roux of the Ciudad de Londres served as one of the vice presidents. Other famous consumer retail manufacturers included El Buen Tono, the jewelers of La Esmeralda and La Perla, and several others. Representatives of banking, mining, and several other industries served on the committee, but by a wide majority famous retailers dominated. [751](#)

The *fiestas* were to demonstrate the progressive force of commerce in the making of a modern Mexico. As one newsmagazine describing the event wrote: “It cannot be denied; it was essential that since commerce is the life spirit for modern peoples that Mexico’s should take part in this month’s festivities. . .” [752](#) On the morning of September 4 the festivities began. A

congregation of several dozen allegorical cars formed at the Colón monument on the Paseo de la Reforma. Commerce, Agriculture, Mining, Industry, Banking, and ten workers' groups including mutualist societies and "peons from neighbouring haciendas"

entered vehicles but the vast majority of entrants were from stores in the Capital or tobacco and beer companies. [753](#) Firms spent lavishly on these allegorical themes; the Palacio would thrill crowds with its Middle Age motif complete with knights and pages escorting the float. [754](#) Other department stores receiving special mention were those of the Centro [751](#) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, June 11, 1910, 2.

[752](#) *Artes y Letras*, Sept. 11, 1910, 2.

[753](#) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Sept. 5, 1910, 2.

[754](#) For photographs of the event, especially the allegorical cars, see the eight-page edition of *Artes y Letras*, Sept. 11, 1910.

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Mercantil, the Fábricas Universales, and the Sorpresa y Primavera. [755](#) At 10AM the procession began. Heading north they turned east onto Avenida Juárez and continued directly to the Zócalo along San Francisco and Plateros. Judging by the photos taken along this first leg of the journey several thousands of onlookers gathered to watch, leaving only a narrow passage on the street for the floats to pass. Entering the Zócalo the line of vehicles passed before the Cathedral and the National Palace where President Díaz, Vice-President Ramón Corral, and the diplomatic corps viewed the procession from the balconies. [756](#) They continued around the Plaza past the Municipal Hall and the headed back West past the Centro Mercantil along September 16 Avenue. Several blocks later it headed north then switched back along Cinco de Mayo and finally returned east along Tacuba and stopped at the Alameda Park after completing a zigzag tour of

all the streets in the commercial heart of the city between the Zócalo Plaza and the Alameda. [757](#) The vehicles were not the only ornaments along the route: nearly all the stores—particularly the department stores—had transformed their facades and show windows with patriotic colours, banners, and an assortment of other decorations such as the ubiquitous shields with slogans such as “Peace,”

“Order and Progress,” and “1810-1910.” At night, stores lit up their exteriors with thousands of bulbs supplied by the Mexican Light and Power Company (which had offered free bulbs to private residences wishing to illuminate their homes). [758](#) The Cathedral and National Palace accommodated the most—16,000 and 8,900—but the Palacio followed closely with [755](#) *Le Mexique*, Sept. 5, 1910, 267.

[756](#) *Artes y Letras*, Sept. 11, 1910, 4.

[757](#) *La Clase Media*, Mar. 27, 1910, 22.

[758](#) *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Sept. 3, 1910, 3.

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6000 while the Importador, Centro Mercantil and Francia Maritima each attached over 1000

lights in artistic arrangements. [759](#)

After the parade the participants and invited guests of the government and foreign diplomatic corps removed to the more secluded space of the gardens of the Chapultepec Restaurant. There they held a charity kermesse complete with a variety of foreign dance style contests, assorted games, cinema exhibits, flirtatious “confetti battles” and the usual beer and cigarette company *puestos* where consumers could enjoy a drink under the shade of tall trees and take in the air. By late afternoon the “Garden Party” dispersed

and gave way at 6 o'clock to the exclusive Ball and Banquet held in the Crystal Room in the restaurant. At eleven the party concluded with a fireworks display. [760](#)

The day had been a great success with much Champagne consumed while toasting the President, national progress, and important role of business and right-thinking gentlemen in the continued modernization of the Republic. To commemorate their role during the day and the broader centennial festivities the organizing committee spent an amazing \$52,000 and published 10,000 copies of a luxurious photographic tome—the *Album Oficial Del Comité Nacional del Comercio. Premier Centenario de la Independencia de Mexico, 1810-1910*.

Nearly two hundred pages, and measuring 18x14 inches, the album includes images of not only the parade, festivities, and leading stores but also included those of government officials, foreign dignitaries, and photo after photo of commercial and industrial enterprises throughout the Republic. Although an expensive project, the business community did not hesitate in producing such a magnificent record of the world they had helped to create. In their experience such capital investments had always delivered ample returns.

759 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, July 11, 1910, 3.

760 For plans, see *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Aug. 19, 1910, 3; and Aug. 25, 1910, 2. For a description of the Garden Party and for photographs, see *Artes y Letras*, Sept. 11, 1910, 8.

Table One

The Departments of the Palacio de Hierro Department Store 1.

Departamento de Modas (Especialidad en Trajes para Donas) 2. Dept. de
Sastrería

3. Dept. de Sedas

4. Dept. de Telas de Lana y Lana y Seda

5. Dept. de Generos de Algodon para Vestidos

6. Dept. de Casimires

7. Dept. de Cambrays, Nansoucks, Batistas y Organdis Blancos (Nuestro surtido se renueva á la llegada de cada vapor)

8. Dept. de Generos Blancos y Calicots

9. Dept. de Telas de Puro Lino

10. Dept. de Artículos para Forros de Todas Clases

11. Dept. de Lonas para Catres y Tiendas de Campaña

12. Dept. de Driles, Holandas y Algodones

13. Dept. de Modas y Sombreros

14. Dept. de Modas y Costuras

15. Talleres de Confecciones

16. Dept. de Confecciones para Señora

17. Dept. de Batas y Matinés

18. Enaguas para Calle

19. Dept. de Bramantes de Algodón y de Lino y Cotines para Colchones 20.
Dept. de Vestidos para Niñas

21. Dept. de Trajecitos para Niños

22. Dept. de Sombreros para Niñas

23. Dept. de Formas, Sombreros y Adornos

24. Dept. de Corbatas para Caballeros

25. Dept. de Sombreritos y Fallas para Niñas

26. Dept. de Ropa Interior para Sras. y Niñas

27. Dept. de Corsetería

28. Dept. de Bonetería

29. Dept. de Pañuelos y Mascados

30. Dept. de Guantes

31. Dept. de Camisas, Cuellos y Puños

32. Dept. de Paraguas

33. Dept. de Manteles y Servilletas

34. Dept. de Sombrillas y Encás

35. Dept. de Impermeables, Mangas y Zapatos de Hule

36. Artículos para Ciclistas

37. Sombreros y Cachucas para Caballeros

38. Abanicos

39. Bastones (plumeros)

40. Dept. de Toallas, Sábanas de baño y Telas para Tohallas 272

41. Alemaniscos y Servilletas
42. Artículos para Mesa
43. Hules para Mesas, Pasillos y Escaleras
44. Dept. de Chales y Tapalos de Seda
45. Dept. de Ponchos, Plaids, etc.
46. Cobertadores y Edredones
47. Dept. de Colchas, Cojines y Sábanas
48. Dept. de Tiras, Bordadas y Encajes
49. Dept. de Listonería
50. Dept. de Adornos para Vestidos
51. Dept. de Paños, Astrakanes, Peluche y Pielles para Confecciones 52.
Dept. de Layettees, Ropones y Pelisses
53. Dept. de Artículos Diversos
54. Dept. de Artículos para Viaje
55. Artículos de Devoción
56. Artículos para Desposadas
57. Trousseaux
58. Juguetería
59. Artículos de Paris
60. Dept. de Perfumería

- 61. Artículos de Mercería
- 62. Plantas Artificiales
- 63. Dept. de Muebles Finos Fantasia
- 64. Magnífico y Suntuoso Dept. de Muebles de Salón
- 65. Juegos de Comedor y Recámara
- 66. Dept. de Alfombras y Pasillos
- 67. Tapetes
- 68. Dept. de Cortinas, Visos, Transparentes & Cortinaje de Todas Clases 69.
Dept. de Brocateles, Bourets, Cretonas, Felpas, etc.
- 70. Dept. de Tul y Punto
- 71. Dept. de Flecos, Cordones y Pasamanería para Muebles
- 72. Carpetas y Pantallas
- 73. Dept. de Talleres
- 74. Dept. de Mayoreo

Source: *Grandes Almacenes de “El Palacio de Hierro” Obsequio a nuestros favorecedores. Agenda para el año 1900* (Mexico City: Tip. El Lápiz de Aguila, 1900).

Table Two

Department Stores and Important *Almacenes de Novedades*

in Late Porfirian Mexico City

Store Name

Store Owner(s)

Other Information

1. El Palacio de Hierro

Sociedad Anónima (Tron

Founded 1860 as Fábricas de

Family—Joseph, Jules, and

Francia, opens as first

Henri—and other

department store in nation in

shareholders)

1891 with several expansions

by 1910. Located on Calle

Bernardo behind City Hall.

Branch store in Paris

2. El Puerto de Liverpool

J. B. Ebrard y Cia, Sucs.

Established 1847. 1898

1893 reorganization adds

becomes a department store.

Antoine and François Proal,

Located at San Bernardo and

Alphonse Michel and Honoré Callejuela, across the street

Béraud as partners.

and East of the Palacio.

Incorporates as S.A. in 1907

Branch store in Paris.

3. Las Fábricas Universales

A.(Alexandre) Reynaud y

Established 1893.Originally

Cia. Original owner,

at the corner of the Portal de

Hippolyte Donnadieu dies

las Flores and Callejuela,

1895, buried in French

moves across the street

cemetery in Mexico City
(South) from the Palacio
(Bernardo and Monterilla)
for its expansion to
department store. Branch
store in Paris.

4. Al Puerto de Veracruz
(Léon) Signoret, (Léon &
Located kitty-corner from the
Maurice) Honnorat y Cia.
Palacio at Capuchinas and
Monterilla (Southwest
corner). Branch store in
Paris.

5. El Centro Mercantil/La
The Centro was originally
Robert moves La Valenciana
Valenciana
incorporated as a Sociedad
into the Centro Mercantil

Anónima with José de Teresa after he buys it in 1901 and y Miranda as President.

seeks to expand beyond his Sebastián Robert, owner of located in the Portal de las La Valenciana, bought the Flores. Located on the whole Centro building in Southwest corner of the 1901 and continued to lease Zócalo, wrapping around out office space on the upper about one-third the Portal de floors while continuing a Mercaderes and continuing department store on the the length of Tlalpaleros. S. bottom three floors.

Robert et Cie. has a branch

store in Paris.

6. La Ciudad de Londres

J. Ollivier y Cia, made of of

After its last renovation in

Joseph and Marius Ollivier.

1909, at the corner of

Also owned the *almacen de*

Avenida San Francisco and

novedades El Sol. In 1906

the Calle de la Palma. Now

bought up the Sorpresa y

probably across from the

Primavera Unidas. Owns the Sorpresa y Primavera, also

Cristaleria Moderna which

owned by Ollivier.

sold domestic as well as

Previously located at

imported crystal, porcelain,

Monterilla and Capuchinas.

crockery, and silverware.

7. La Francia Maritima

Donnadieu, Veyan & Cia.

Located on the corner on

Angel and Capuchinas

(Southeast corner)

8. La Reforma de Comercio

A.(Adolphe) Richaud y Cia.,

Empadrillo y Tacuba,

Sucs.

across from the back of the

Cathedral. Also owned El

Nuevo Mundo.

9. La Sorpresa y Primavera

After 1906, J. Ollivier y Cia. Located on the first block of Unidas

Prior, owned by A. Fourcade

Plateros stretching down La

y Cia until Fourcade dies and Palma. Probably shared a

store experiences credit

wall with the Centro
problems briefly. Originally
Mercantil after the latter was
forged in 1878 by Victor
built. Renovated to a five
Goupil, a non-Barcelonnette
storey building by Ollivier.
Frenchman from Bourdeaux,
when he merged his La
Sorpresa with neighbouring
Primavera. This was *THE*
store of the early Porfiriato.

10. El Importador

Max Chauvet

San Bernardo no. 19

11. El Correo Frances

M. Lambert y Cia

Portal de las Flores nos. 6-7.

12. Fábricas de Francia et

Ailhaud Hnos.

Monterilla and Diputación

Novedades

13. El Progreso

Michel Bellon y Cia

14. El Surtidor

Primitivo Pérez y Cia.

Located on the first block of

Plateros, nos. 3 and 4. One

of the successful non-

Barcelonnette stores. Gave

itself a needed facelift

between 1904 and 1906 that

improved its image.

15. El Nuevo Mundo

A. Richaud y Cia., Sucs.

Same owners as La Reforma

de Comercio.

16. El Paje (De la Ciudad de Jauffred y Audiffred before

After ownership change and

Bruselas before 1903)

1903, Carlos Arellano y Cia.

expansion in 1903 moved

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after.

from the south side of the

first block of Plateros

(opening onto the Zócalo,

part of the Portal de

Mercaderes) to the north
side.

17. El Progreso Mercantil

A. Martin Levy

Second block of Monterilla,
nos. 10 and 11. Just South of
the Puerto de Veracruz. Four
storeys, but not a corner lot.

18. El Gran Sederia

Jules Albert y Cia.

First block Plateros, no. 4.

19. New England

Armand Bugnot

Claims branches in the US
and Europe.

20. La Samaritana

García, Pérez y Cia.

Empedradrillo 3. To the

West of the Cathedral.

21. La Ciudad de Hamburgo German

22. Korff y Honsburg

German

23. Casa Boker

German. Boker Family

Corner of Espíritu Santo and

Cadena (today Isabel la

Católica and Venustiano

Carranza)

24. La Suiza

Deutschler y Kern

First block Plateros, no. 1

25. Al Zafiro

F. Sanche y Cia. Sucs.

Spanish. Located on the

second block of Plateros and

Palma.

Chapter Five

An All-Consuming Passion:

Department Store Criminality and the Modernization of Crime

“One of the manifestations of today’s progress is, as they say, the refinement of vice.”

-- *El Diablito Rojo*, July 13, 1908, 2.

Two irreproachably-dressed young women walked into the Palacio de Hierro and took seats at the counter of the Cashmere department. This was not an ideal moment for leisurely shopping. The clock neared six, marking the middle of the early evening shopping rush hour when capitalino society left work and flooded the main traffic arteries in carriages and on foot. This crush of humanity had many often overlapping aims: some to purchase needed household items; others to window shop or browse the aisles; many to see and be seen on the boulevard; and, of course, a good number simply yearned for the tranquility of home after a day at the office. Moreover, with New Year’s just days away, the larger-than-normal crowds of customers in the Palacio examined merchandise in search of gifts and the perfect accessories and dress material for parties to welcome in another year of prosperity.

Within moments a clerk in the department—an impeccably groomed young man—

introduced himself to Juana Rojas and María Victoria Villanueva. As they exchanged the usual salutations that prefaced commercial transactions he sized up his new customers. Well-dressed, versed in the etiquette of the store counter, and quite attractive—not too dark, they offered the potential of not only a decent commission but also an agreeable opportunity for flirtation. He mentioned that he had not seen them before, noting that he would have remembered such a beautiful sight. They replied that their families had recently moved from Morelia and that they looked forward to the wonderful shopping and entertainment offered by the capital. And so the conversation went, with the clerk bringing more and more pieces 277

of cashmere for inspection. He, seeking to charm them into purchasing as much as possible and perhaps even into seeing him some other time outside of the store; the young ladies, showering him with “flattery and smiles” hoping perhaps for a “special discount” that clerks often informally granted loyal or particularly attractive members of his personal clientele.

The Palacio was not the only store where the sensuousness of the goods and the store atmosphere merged with the rapport between many young male clerks and their female customers.

Unfortunately for the clerk, the two ladies had also sized him up while he did the same with them. They determined him an easy mark. As shoplifters, Juana and María were looking for more than a discount on their purchases that night.

After a period of time the cashmere had accumulated into a considerable pile which threatened to topple onto the merchandise being viewed by the customers on either side. The ladies asked the clerk to bring down one more shawl, one located on the top shelf of the *tarima* behind him. Rapidly becoming disenchanted, he mulled over a woman’s inability to make

decisions while he turned to climb the ladder for the item. As he turned, Juana quickly whisked two of the shawls from the middle of the soft mountain and stuffed them into the pocket of her long coat that protected her from the icy December winds. Although sizeable, the pieces of material easily fit into the pocket; Juana had installed “kangaroo pouches,”

ripping out the stitching at the base of the pocket and then sewing on extra material to extend its capacity. Returning with the top-shelf cashmere the clerk received an unwelcome response. The ladies apologized and said they were too exhausted to decide. They promised to return tomorrow and make a decision. Only after they had left and merged into a throng of shoppers did the clerk notice the missing pieces as he sorted, folded and returned the

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merchandise. Feelings of anger mixed with a realization of his gullibility as he called the department manager to inform him of the deception. After passing the word and calling the store detectives the personnel might have caught Juana and María and sent them to Belén prison. More likely, those seemingly solid members of respectable society had slipped into the protective anonymity of the boulevard crowd. The only decision left was whether to keep their goods or to visit their favourite pawnshop and pocket the \$60 or \$80 pesos they would receive. Shoplifting in Mexico could be lucrative indeed. [761](#)

How Mexican society and its press [762](#) reacted to—and interpreted—criminality in the new department stores offers an untried approach to understanding the profound impact of modernization and the harder-to-quantify influence of modernity upon it. This chapter will begin with an overview of how shoplifters operated, how store management responded, how the press reported the crimes and how this compared to other contemporary societies. What follows is a consideration of how the manipulation and transgression of cultural assumptions by shoplifters

threatened the safety of Porfirian categories of social order. A summary of 761 The above account is a composite of several shoplifting cases, descriptions of shoplifters, and accounts of customer-clerk interactions. For photos of Juana and María see the *Página Negra* feature in *La Gaceta de Policia*, Jan. 7, 1906, 11. Other sources for this shoplifting scene are: *La Gaceta de Policia*, Feb. 4, 1906, 15; Feb. 11, 1906, 15; Oct. 16, 1906, 15; *Echo du Mexique*, Apr. 9, 1897, 2; Emile Zola, *Au Bonheur des dames* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 371, cited in Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 81. For one example of customer-clerk dialogue, see *La Semana en el Hogar*, July 22, 1895, 3. Another interaction revealing the sexual tension represented by the counter trade, see *El Imparcial*, Dec. 18, 1897, 2, which reproduces the sexual advances of a male employee upon a female customer trying on gloves. The article blames “this commercial epidemic of flirting on pulp fiction novels [*novelas de bibliotecas económicas*].” For more on these novels, refer to Chapter Two and its account of the story and sales of *Los 41*, one of the most famous of these novels during the Porfiriato. See Robert McKee Irwin, Edward J. McCaughan, and Michelle Rocio Nasser, eds., *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control*.

762 Not all newspapers reported on crime. Of the many that did, I have concentrated on the following: *Le Courrier du Mexique* and *L’Echo du Mexique* as the voice of the French colony, the largest department and clothing store interests, and representative of extremely influential foreign “civilizing” opinion; *La Semana Mercantil* as the voice of the National Chamber of Commerce and an advocate of national economic and cultural modernization; *El Imparcial* as the largest circulation daily and practitioner of sensationalist journalism; and *La Gaceta de Policia* as both pure, sensationalist tabloid on the issue of Law and Order as well as a rich source of editorializing and mugshots of criminals featured on its regular *Página Negra* (Black Page).

other forms of department store criminality completes an evidential background for the chapter. At this point an outline of the traditional elite model of crime will serve as a starting mark from which to observe how radically department store crimes departed from its premises. The extensive press coverage and public fascination with property thefts such as shoplifting signalled the ascent of a new, modernizing theory of criminality which helped explain this phenomenon of heretofore considered ill-fated criminals now adopting modern skills and values to successfully prey upon symbols of Mexican progress. The final section of this chapter will observe the transatlantic nature of this crime theory before concluding how it served to illuminate both the contradictions and tensions within the Porfirian vision of an orderly progressing modern society as well as provide a comforting explanation for the larger social changes that department store crime represented.

A Few Specifics

What we know about shoplifting and other department store criminality as a historical subject is limited. Historians such as Elaine Abelson, Patricia O'Brien, and—to a lesser degree—Michael Miller have written on its significance in the United States and France at the end of the nineteenth century. [763](#) John Lancaster comments briefly on its presence in London stores during the same time period. [764](#) Among Mexican historians shoplifting remains to be investigated. Despite this, we can still make some general observations on the *modus operandi* of Porfirian shoplifters and the cat-and-mouse game they played with store [763](#) Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*; Patricia O'Brien, "Bourgeois Women and Theft," *Journal of Social History* 17 (Fall 1983): 65-77; Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 197-205.

[764](#) Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 184-186.

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personnel as well as offer a few initial comparisons to their contemporary North Atlantic counterparts.

Accounts of shoplifters at Mexico City department stores and *magasins de novedades* begin to appear regularly in the mid-1890s. Although I am sure that they began earlier, the first accounts that I found occurred in 1896 [765](#) and by April of 1897 the French colony's *L'Echo du Mexique* could opine that "Very often the press in the capital registers thefts committed by

women in the *magasins de novedades*” as a preamble for its account of how a woman stole 14 metres of black cashmere from the store *El Correo Frances*. ⁷⁶⁶ Given the quantity of fabric (over 40 feet) one must wonder where she hid it and how quickly she could make her escape.

Robberies could be made by individuals although often teams of two or even three cooperated and could be same- or opposite-sex combinations. Although the press reported frequent thefts committed by men and, to a far less extent, children, the majority of acts were those of women. While the scene introducing this chapter involved both ladies seated at the counter, oftentimes shoplifters working in teams left one member—the mark—at some distance from the counter. In this approach, the individual charged with the initial snatch departs from the counter and passes off the goods to the unknown mark who may pass the goods to yet another before exiting. By doing so, in case of capture the individual making the initial grab may plead innocence. If working alone or if all members worked the counters, the usual plan was to follow the strategy of Juana and Maria noted above. A variation or amplification of this may be found in this description of the shoplifter offered by the tabloid newspaper *La Gaceta de Policia*: “Dressed elegantly, she has polite manners ⁷⁶⁵ *L’Echo du Mexique*, July 7, 1896, 2; Oct. 24, 1896, 2.

⁷⁶⁶ *L’Echo du Mexique*, Apr. 9, 1897, 2.

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[*ademanos correctos*] and endless kind smiles for the employees from whom they request to see measures of expensive silk, they use an opportune moment to hide the pieces in their clothing whereupon they exit from the establishment saying that the object did not please them, or that it was too expensive, or that they’ll ‘come back later.’” ⁷⁶⁷ No matter the strategy, shoplifters often altered their clothing to hide their contraband. Such

alterations included the kangaroo pouches described in the introduction or other hidden pockets as well as secret compartments in the crowns of gentlemen's hats. [768](#)

The gender of the shoplifters often determined their tactics. Since the overwhelming majority—if not all—of a store's clerks were male, women tended to charm the salesclerks into complacency. They followed the model of Otilia Salazar, described as dedicated to robbing clothing stores by “distracting the employees with flattery and smiles in order to slip away with numerous objects.” [769](#) Even more devastating were the likes of Amelia Serrano and Maria Soledad Ajuvita who “have hypnotized with their looks and refined manners the unsuspecting employees of clothing stores.” [770](#) Men often employed an upper-class sense of entitlement to bully the clerk into handing over the goods. Both sexes relied heavily upon diversionary tactics. Take, for example, the elegantly dressed man who, while inspecting a half-dozen cashmere scarves, had an accomplice run in, steal his watch, then he ran out in pursuit while carrying the merchandise, never to return. [771](#)

Shoplifters, like pickpockets, preferred large crowds in which to operate and chose favourable business hours. These conditions led to distracted employees and greater cover [767](#) *La Gaceta de Policia*, Oct. 7, 1906, 15.

[768](#) *El Imparcial*, Jan. 7, 1899, 2.

[769](#) *La Gaceta de Policia.*, Feb. 4, 1906, 15.

[770](#) *La Gaceta de Policia*, Feb. 11, 1906, 15.

[771](#) *L'Echo du Mexique*, Jan. 14, 1893, 2.

while fleeing the store. For this reason heightened shoplifting activity occurred during the hours between 11AM and 1PM and then 5PM and 7PM. [772](#)

Mexican retailing traditions shaped the nature and tactics of shoplifting. Two of these customs stand out. The first was the policy of giving out merchandise to potential customers *á vistas*. This allowed a client to take the item—whether a length of fabric or ready-made items—home for consultations with family and friends. [773](#) While suggesting the high degree of sociability involved in Porfirian consumer rituals—particularly among women—its potential for abuse stands obvious. No serious effort formed to end this custom although some editorials complained that it caused owners undue hardship given the amount of capital loaned out and the damaged goods that occasionally returned or the stolen goods that never did. [774](#) Certainly department store criminals must have exploited this generous policy and edgy store clerks would occasionally presume a client's criminality prematurely. [775](#)

The second and most influential custom on the dynamics of shoplifting was the retention of most goods behind long rows of polished wood counters called *mostradores*. If made out of glass, as they increasingly were, they began to take on the more general display case name: *aparadores*. The mostrador made shoplifting a considerably more challenging task than merely snatching merchandise off of a rack. Despite the opportunities presented at [772](#) *La Gaceta de Policia*, Oct. 7, 1906, 15.

[773](#) Weeklies such as *El Mundo Ilustrado* usually boasted a column assisting women in proper etiquette and fashion. In the case of *El Mundo Ilustrado* it offered “*Consultas de las damas*” in which it often recommended requesting samples from stores as well as advised readers on swatches of fabric that they had sent to the newspaper. The best account of *á vistas* comes from *La Semana Mercantil*, May 20, 1889, 299-300 and its listing of items often requested and the social networks through which goods passed before returning to the store.

774 *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Feb. 18, 1900, 18-20; *La Semana Mercantil*, May 20, 1889, 299-300.

775 See *El Imparcial*, Sept. 2, 1902, 1; and Sept. 3, 1902, 4. The first report describes what appears to be a robbery as two beautiful, well-dressed young women unknown to the store supposedly entrance the young male clerk, receive jewels worth \$600 to take “a vistas,” drive off in a carriage, and then the owner hears the story and calls the police. This appears to be a classic case of theft by *elegantes*. The next day, however, the women return without knowing of the controversy and ask to purchase them. The jeweller, embarrassed, begs their forgiveness as they begin to cry. He redoubles his efforts, “making comic manifestations of repentance.”

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certain sales with goods piled on tables either inside or outside the store, most of this crime appears to be over-the-counter shoplifting. Elaine Abelson confirms this pattern even in American department stores which displayed their goods more accessibly than their Mexican counterparts. [776](#)

Pawnshops were one of the most common places for shoplifters and other criminals to convert their goods into cash. The reputation of pawnshops as fences for stolen goods predates the Porfiriato and reaches far back into the colonial period. Marie François has described the organization, contents, and criminal connections (unwittingly or not) of both the Monte de Piedad and smaller, private *casas de empeños* from the Bourbon period until 1920. [777](#) She notes the stricter criteria of the Monte de Piedad and the constant calls and occasionally action for better regulation. Still, in 1895 the *Semana Mercantil* considered pawnshops the weak link in the fight against property theft and ridiculed the current regulations on the pawns which prohibited only the receiving of weapons and items belonging to the nation. [778](#) The journal pointed out that those shop owners who did not question the origins

of goods, particularly brand-new items, were just as guilty as those who committed the crimes. As in any profession or economic sector some actors were less scrupulous than others. *Empeñeros* who did accept stolen goods knowing they could pay less to thieves needing quick cash often knew their limits on certain high-profile items. For example, the bicycle craze of Mexico City in the 1890s precipitated a crime wave on the new and popular technology. [779](#) If they were stolen from a store, police would immediately go to [776](#) Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, 82-83.

[777](#) Marie François, *A Culture of Everyday Credit: Housekeeping, Pawnbroking, and Governance in Mexico City, 1750-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming 2006).

[778](#) *La Semana Mercantil*, Dec. 2, 1895, 568-569.

[779](#) For more on the bicycle mania sweeping the capital, see William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

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the pawnshops and tell them not to buy. [780](#) Owners knew they could be financially liable if police found stolen merchandise in their stores.

In 1905 department and other clothing store owners demanded and achieved tougher regulations against pawnshops. Store owners directed the National Chamber of Commerce to push Governor Landa y Escandón to institute closer surveillance and tougher penalties on pawns. In a populist spirit, Landa y Escandón also reduced the usurious interest tax that *empeñeros* charged on goods. [781](#)

Pawnshops were not the only places to unload stolen goods. The street sale of cheap, stolen merchandise was another. The reselling of items to competitors of the victims also occurred. [782](#) One of the most talked about

and therefore probably overrated places for the sale of stolen goods was the *Mercado de Volador*, often dubbed the Thieves' Market.

Supposedly what the thieves stole during the week showed up for sale on Sunday. Foreign visitors with plans of writing a book of their journey made obligatory pilgrimages to this market. They titillated their readers with images of "picturesque crowds of ragged vendors"

acting as fences and repeated how "Many instances are told by foreigners who were robbed, and, in a few hours, found their property exposed for sale in this market. They were obliged to pay considerable sums to recover their own property." ⁷⁸³ Even the French colony's *Le Courrier du Mexique* thought that the Parisian paper *Globe Trotter* had exaggerated the Market for its readers' benefit and blackened the reputation of Mexican society with such ⁷⁸⁰ *L'Echo du Mexique*, Oct. 2, 1896, 2. In this case, thieves broke into the depot of the Standard Bike Co. on trendy San Francisco Avenue and stole 7 bikes worth \$1500. Police immediately informed local pawn shops.

⁷⁸¹ See "Los Robos en los Almacenes," *La Semana Mercantil*, May 15, 1905, 233; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, May 6, 1905, 3; May 10, 1905, 3.

⁷⁸² *El Imparcial*, Oct. 4, 1899, 3.

⁷⁸³ See, for example, Nevin O. Winter, *Mexico and Her People Today: An Account of the Custom, Characteristics, Amusements, History and Advancement of the Mexicans, and the Development and Resources of Their Country*, Revised Ed. (Boston: L. C. Page & Co., 1923), 340; and W. E. Carson, *Mexico: The Wonderland of the South* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1909), 95.

claims as “the vagabonds of Mexico are perhaps the greatest thieves in creation.” [784](#) Despite its high profile, I suspect that Volador had become little more than a tourist trap flea market by the mid-Porfiriato.

Stores did not leave themselves defenseless. They marshalled a variety of defenses against shoplifting. Store employees themselves caught shoplifters and held them until police arrived. Managers watched both customers and employees. Larger retailers such as department stores appear to have emulated the French, British, and Americans and hired store detectives to nab shoplifters and pickpockets. These detectives also served as another level of surveillance against employees who—as will be discussed later in this chapter—were not unknown to supplement their incomes at the expense of their employers. Electric lighting and glass merchandise cases also helped, furnishing what Elaine Abelson calls “still another view of the continual dichotomy between display and protection.” [785](#) Light and glass in concert with colour, the creation of the crowd, and other devices were two of the most prominent ways in which the department store heightened sensory stimulation and created a desire for the merchandise. At the same time, light and glass assisted in ordering and surveilling that desire and minimizing the number of items leaving the store unpaid. The installation of electricity generators by the big stores and the regular complaints against the patchy service of the electric company by groups such as the National Chamber of Commerce were in equal parts addressing concerns of merchandise protection and public order as well as providing proper display conditions. [786](#)

784 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, June 9, 1905, 3.

785 Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, 86.

786 The Chamber of Commerce continued to complain through the end of the Porfiriato—and beyond—as seen in *La Semana Mercantil*, May 24, 1909, 283-284.

Surprisingly, Porfirians did not really have a specific term for shoplifting or shoplifters. *Ládrón* and *ratero* applied to more general theft but were employed for store theft as well. The most common label, *cruzador* or *cruzadora*, was adopted into common usage from street slang (*calo*). Almost unknown today, the term receives a concise—and one of the few—published definitions as follows: “A woman who robs retail stores and is often accompanied by another, often handing off to her what she has stolen.” [787](#) In press and police reports, shoplifters could be men, women, and children, but tellingly this definition focuses on feminine criminality. Because these shoplifters often dressed to fit the image of a respectable client they also attracted the label of *elegantes*, a more general term for men and women that covered actors beyond retail stores who, in the eyes of respectable society, had committed the added transgressive crime of exceeding class boundaries. The label

“*elegante*” was a contemptuous one and should be considered a criminalized version of

“*lagartijo*” or “lizard.” This latter term was commonly used to describe the well-dressed and often dandified young men of indeterminate social background who hung out in the downtown commercial zone, often lounging against display windows like lizards seeking to catch the eye of a young lady passing by in carriage or on foot. [788](#)

But what about kleptomaniac? While widespread in France and the United States the term found occasional usage in Mexico but more often as a description of the act—

kleptomania—versus the actors—kleptomaniacs. The term “kleptomania” first entered 1887 Francisco J. Santamaria, *Diccionario de Mexicanismos*

(Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, S. A., 1959), 314. I confess that in my early research on department stores with a related interest in crime I passed over this term quite a few times before realizing what it meant. The dictionaries of contemporary Spanish that I consulted had left me more confused than enlightened. This experience drove home yet again the value of reference materials such as dictionaries specific to the historical period under consideration. Carlos Roumagnac defines *cruzadora* (not *cruzador*) as “Women who rob clothing stores” among his list of Mexican street slang. See Roumagnac, *Los criminales en México: ensayo de psicología criminal* (Mexico City: Tip. “El Fenix,” 1904), 378.

788 For a foreigner’s view of this urban type, see the full-page article in the monthly newsmagazine *Modern Mexico*, March, 1903, 32.

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common usage in Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century to describe individuals (mostly women) who stole compulsively from stores selling clothing, fabrics and accessories. It received its first lengthy and scientific treatment in 1840 France. [789](#)

Originally focussed on the pathology or eccentricity of the individual, the study of kleptomania changed as the century drew to a close. Studies increasingly emphasized the social milieu in which kleptomania took place. They noted the connection between the development of department stores and the dramatic rise in the incidence of kleptomania. The

“Palaces of Consumption” with their irresistible—some would say seductive—display techniques seemed capable of turning ladies of respectable society into inveterate criminals against their will. Many worried that department stores might lead to the mass criminalization of middle-class French women; they expressed the confusion experienced by many on how department stores as bourgeois institutions “were expected to uphold the moral order, not threaten it.” [790](#)

The concept of kleptomania was, of course, rife with assumptions of class. Ladies could not be called criminals, so the medicalization of shoplifting offered a palatable option and allowed for the retention of respectability among the deserving. [791](#) Making shoplifting a medical condition for those within a certain social station made “I couldn’t help myself” a sufficient alibi, one that along with a donation to charity and perhaps a promise never to enter the store again often proved sufficient to shield the offender from criminal prosecution or public humiliation. As Abelson makes clear, store managers often turned a blind eye to shoplifting among its better clientele until it became too blatant and preferred to hush up 789 C.C.H. Marc, *De la folie considérée dans ses rapports avec les questions medico-judiciaires*, 2 vols., (Paris: J.-B. Baillière, 1840).

790 Miller, *Bon Marché*, 205.

791 Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, 11.

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rather than publicize any infractions so as to protect its valued customer base and its public image as a safe and morally irreproachable place for respectable ladies to congregate. [792](#)

Despite this public hand-wringing about middle-class women, Miller compels his readers to remember that much of the crime committed in the Bon Marché was the work of

“professionals or common shoplifters.” [793](#) Presumably this means individuals of a lower class or criminal class, but I wonder if this barrier between kleptomaniac and mere shoplifter, between respectable and criminal, is perhaps more porous than Miller allows.

This ambiguity strikes at the heart of one of the key questions in this chapter: who were the shoplifters in Mexico City? The answer can only be those who were reported in the press and those who were not. An unexpected divergence exists between Mexican newspapers and those of the United States and France when it comes to the coverage of store theft. Abelson's and O'Brien's sources demonstrate that the press did not share the compunction of store managers to hush-up shoplifting by respectable ladies and made information readily available about these women. Name, age, address, occupation of husband and other data helped place these women in their social context. ⁷⁹⁴ In Mexican newspapers no such coverage existed; reports of gente decente shoplifting were largely hushed up. Even the French colony press—as the voice of the largest retailing interests and therefore an advocate of tougher punishment—abstained from publishing full names when it did occasionally report on gente decente shoplifting in the early years of the media mania for the crime. *L'Echo du Mexique* represented this style in one of its 1896 crime reports: “Two young ladies, M.M. and P.A., belonging to the bourgeoisie, were surprised yesterday morning in Jules Albert's store on 1a. Monterilla at the moment when they hid under their ⁷⁹² *Ibid.*, 161-162.

⁷⁹³ Miller, *Bon Marché*, 197.

⁷⁹⁴ Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, 10.

skirts several scarves that they had come to steal. They were escorted to the police station.” ⁷⁹⁵ Such reports in Mexico involving middle-class ladies were rare, exceedingly so for those “escorted to the police station.”

Thus shoplifters in the Mexican press were not “kleptomaniacs” but rather

“cruzadoras” and “elegantes.” These were people assumed and sometimes confirmed to have experienced multiple arrests, to belong to a lower-socioeconomic standing, and to compose a

“criminal class” that preyed upon respectable society, threatened public order, and retarded national progress. The public crime narratives built upon their actions and presumed motives form the foundation of this chapter.

Transgressions and Concerns of Proper Consumption

In executing their crime, department store shoplifters crystallized the insecurities held by Porfirian respectable society. Many of these insecurities reflected a common transatlantic belief among elites that their societies were in a state of decay and moral decline despite the dramatic material and intellectual achievements achieved in the nineteenth century. [796](#)

Shoplifters broke not only criminal laws against theft of property but also manipulated and defied elite assumptions of social space, race, class, gender, and proper consumption. Report after criminal report created an impression that the societal danger of shoplifters was less their economic predations than their social effrontery and threat to “moral order.”

Undoubtedly the cumulative economic cost of shoplifting must have been considerable for 795 *L’Echo du Mexique*, Oct. 24, 1896, 2.

796 For France, see Eugen Weber, *France, Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986); for Germany, see Warren G. Breckman, “Disciplining Consumption: The Debate about Luxury in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1914,” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 485-506; for Mexico through the lens of masculinity consult Victor Manuel

Macías-González, “The Mexican Aristocracy and Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911”

(Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1999); for the United States, Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

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store owners; nonetheless, in the narrative created by the press the frequent recitation of the value of stolen merchandise often comes across as a frustrated and inadequate attempt to quantify the extent of the greater crime against society.

Penetrating and disrupting the orderly social space of the *gente decente* stands as the first transgression. Historians of both the colonial and national periods of Mexico have marked out the ongoing struggle between ruling and popular classes to stake their claim to public space and define the character of the cities. Concerns of moral safety served as a central justification for the expelling of lower class recreations and individuals from urban centers. Physically marginalizing or the outright banning activities such as gambling, begging, prostitution, and cockfighting or popular institutions including pulquerías and sidewalk cinemas were just a few of the state-directed strategies enacted by the *gente decente* to reduce crime and immorality in order to create an orderly, moral social space that made tangible their vision of modern urban living. [797](#) Sweeping police reforms and the stationing of thousands of new *gendarmes* in the capital served to administer and enforce these laws. Results were mixed in the city centres which were the focal point of these sanitization efforts.

Department stores set a new stage in this conflict. They reflected the influence and impact of commercial capital on Mexican society. The construction of these enormous stores—the quintessential institution of respectable society—established a new hybrid space both public and private: private in that it was both enclosed and on private property; public in that it was a market moved inside, governed by the new consumer culture mantra touting 797 William E. French, “Moralizing the Masses,” Chap. 2 in *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Pablo Piccato, “The discourse about alcoholism and criminality in Mexico City, 1890-1917,” (master’s thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1993).

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the “democratization of luxury” and its policies of free entry and the serving of an economically ecumenical clientele. This new space had the potential to realize an ordered and surveilled “public space” for respectable society. Most galling to social observers was that the audacity of shoplifters and other law-breakers brought disorder to the hoped-for order.

Manipulating Porfirian stereotypes and assumptions of race, class, and gender were essential in this disordering of social space. Consider first class and race, two categories of social distinction so closely intertwined in Mexican society. While department stores now allowed most anyone in, the best service as usual went to those who appeared best able to afford it. On the most superficial level, the employee’s calculations took into account the colour of skin and manner of dress. A perusal of the photos published in the *Página Negra* of the *Gaceta de Policía* reveals shoplifters with skin tone ranging from the medium-brown mestiza to olive and what appears quite pale. [798](#) Proper attire and a full purse often brightens one’s skin socially in Mexico; the women in the photos dressed in a range from tasteful to extremely fashionable with not a single *zarape*, *rebozo*, or hair braid among

the lot. The jolting distinctiveness of the few reported exceptions to this rule makes the point. [799](#)

798 A few examples of the mugshot galleries may be found in the following editions of *La Gaceta de Policia*: Dec. 17, 1905, 9; Dec. 24, 1905, 11; Jan. 7, 1906, 11; Jan. 21, 1906, 13; Feb. 11, 1906, 15; Feb. 18, 1906, 15; Feb. 15, 1906, 15; Aug. 12, 1906, 15; Oct. 7, 1906, 15; Nov. 11, 1906, 16; and Apr. 19, 1908, 15.

799 In late 1897 an article in the French newspaper *L'Echo du Mexique* documents how a woman entered into a jewelry store and stole a watch left on the counter while the clerks were otherwise occupied (*L'Echo du Mexique*, Oct. 7, 1897, 2). What makes this not-infrequent event remarkable for the reader of dozens of these accounts is that the woman is described as “une femme du peuple,” meaning she is a traditionally-dressed Indian and probably quite poor. This is not to say that press coverage of criminal acts by the lower classes was a novelty. Nothing could be further from the truth as newspapers covered popular criminality to the point of *ad nauseum*. The point is that the criminal did not match the crime in terms of habitual coverage in the press. For this reason, when a singular account such as this shakes the reader from an assumed trajectory in the text then the idea should be entertained that for consumers of the Porfirian Press a narrative of shoplifting had already formed by the 1890s.

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Newspaper reports of shoplifting regularly noted that the culprits were “well-dressed,” “elegantly-dressed,” or “appeared honourable” and had thus fooled the employee.

But as the Mexican *dicho* goes, “A monkey dressed in silk is still a monkey.” [800](#) For that reason, an accomplished con artist had to possess not

only shopping etiquette to lull an employee into complacency but the constellation of manners and knowledge that marked one as one of the better members of society. This made *elegantes* such as the con artist who robbed the famous Labadie jewellers in 1903 so dangerous: claiming he was the son of a

“comfortable family from the interior” he was an “individual correctly presented, wore suits of fine cashmere, and changed morning and afternoon conforming to the demands of the most rigorous fashion.” [801](#) Or Berta Gutiérrez and Rosa Rubio, “very dangerous *cruzadoras* who, elegantly dressed, entered dry goods stores where they’ve committed numerous ingeniously executed robberies. They are now free and the public must be alert because their distinguished manners and attire can easily surprise the good faith of the public.” [802](#)

In this way the manipulation of societal assumptions by shoplifting and swindling *elegantes* was a classic “crime of passing.” This status misrepresentation cut to the quick of Porfirian society’s obsession with social hierarchies and the need to make them visible through such markers of personal consumption as clothing. In a society so concerned with maintaining visible social boundaries and order little wonder Porfirians sought to transform the character of—or outright ban—popular Carnival celebrations for both their “world-800 *La mona vestida en seda, mona se queda*.”

801 *El Imparcial*, Dec. 30, 1903, 1.

802 *La Gaceta de Policia*, Aug. 2, 1906, 15.

turned-upside-down” nature as well as the masks and costumes—the public disguises—that marked this holiday. [803](#)

But a worrying thought must have tugged at readers if they considered that shoplifters could replicate not only the material trappings of class but also the much more difficult niceties of etiquette and behaviour. Were the perpetrators of these crimes really social impostors? Might a considerable number be class traitors instead? Could the deeply ingrained and comforting belief in a neat division between respectable society and a criminal class recruited from the lower socio-economic stations remain intact? Many undoubtedly did grapple with this, given the appearance of kleptomania as a category to medicalize and decriminalize property theft by middle-class ladies. Such threats posed to the received wisdom of social classification must have only compounded *fin-de-siècle* angst about the stability of society.

Equally disturbing as the manipulation of class and race attributions was that of gender. Women shoplifters—*cruzadoras*—were often young, attractive, and used Porfirian notions of chivalry and gender distinctions to their fullest advantage. An 1897 editorial in *El Imparcial* attacks the double-standard used by society in judging male and female thieves. [804](#)

Entitled “Thefts by the fair sex: hearts and lace” and written in the midst of what the press called a crime wave perpetrated by petty criminals, the editorial begins by castigating readers who assumed such a title would lead to a tale of how a dark-eyed beauty had robbed the editorialist of his heart. He lays out his argument that those “dedicated to the betterment of 803 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968); Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, trans. Mary Feeney (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1980). For specific cases of transformed Carnival celebrations in Chihuahua and Monterrey during the Porfiriato see Steven B. Bunker,

“Making the Good Old Days: Invented Tradition and Civic Ritual in Northern Mexico, 1880-1910,” (honours essay, University of British Columbia, 1992), 43-51.

804 *El Imparcial*, Nov. 11, 1897, 2.

society to the detriment of crooks” need to carefully consider the typical societal response to

“crime *performed* [805](#) by smooth and white hands.” A description of a recent clothing store theft in which the gendarmes arrested two young ladies with unpaid goods sets the scene.

Next he states that the perpetrators undoubtedly “started to cry” and that women were far better at such crime than “individuals of the stronger but ugly sex.” He continues: When a thief is caught in the act he doesn’t start to cry, but starts to run. The indignant public shouts ‘Catch the thief! Catch the thief!’ When a young, female *elegante* cries, the public is moved. ‘Poor little girl! Who can be sure that the unfortunate thing didn’t steal the lace *OUT OF NECESSITY!*’ [orig. ital.]

The editorialist notes that the invariable response to those who scold the thief receive the following response by the public: “Man, don’t be such a brute! How can you be so insolent to accuse this young lady of the crime of robbery? Don’t you see that it is a sin against chivalry?” Other onlookers, “more generously,” make the following offer: “I will pay for the lace. What’s the charge?” Before going on to a much longer diatribe against delinquent mothers in the raising of their children, he urges readers to apply the law regardless of sex and commends most gendarmes of applying the law despite the misguided thoughts of the surrounding crowd.

Although in the stores *cruzadoras* could use Porfirian notions of gender to their advantage, in the daily press those same cultural assumptions of a woman’s relationship to society and its morality were used to reprove her actions. *Cruzadoras* drew the most ire of commentators and received the most coverage in the *Gaceta de Policia* because they tapped into a deep-running fear in Mexican society about the moral dangers associated with the public woman. Construction of gender and class in Mexico converged in a

belief system among the *gente decente* based around contrasting notions of femininity, what Bill French 805 The original Spanish, *interpretado*, is best translated as performed in the theatrical sense. Many journalists used such vocabulary as a reflection of the popularity of both theatre and light operas (*zarzuelas*) in the capital.

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has called “Prostitutes and Guardian Angels.” 806 The association of the public sphere with moral danger and the private with safety formed the “Cult of Domesticity,” the foundation of Western society’s middle-class worldview and self definition. Social and economic realities of market societies usually conflict with cultural ideologies and this was no exception. In Chapter One we saw an eruption of this in the public discourse over the use of cigarette girls (*cigarreras*) by El Buen Tono during the Unión Mercantil boycott and the attack and defense over the moral honour of these girls on the streets. These could be rationalized away because they were working-class girls and were forced by circumstance into the public sphere. The perceived moral dangers encountered by middle-class women—often sallying forth without a male chaperon—wandering downtown and shopping from young, male clerks in department stores as mentioned in Chapter Three proved more difficult to dispel.

An illustrative distillation of this gender construct and the threat posed to it by *cruzadoras* comes from the *Página Negra* just before Christmas in 1905 (It also parallels the continuing diatribe in the 1897 *El Imparcial* editorial quoted above): Depressing to one’s spirit is the idea that among the feminine sex there are more than just a few who dedicate themselves, in their pursuit of making a living, to taking on the completely alien form of the *ratero* [thief].

How many considerations have been made to explain the fact of the abundance of *cruzadoras*! If the act of robbery is repugnant in a man, it is even more reproachable in a woman.

The woman is the director of education in the home, and no one can obscure the influence that the habits, vices, and criminal behaviours of the mother, the older sister, the woman of the house, must exercise in the moral environment of a family.

We have said many times in the past that [shoplifters range from] girls of just a few years to old women; shabbily dressed and shoeless to women of middle-class attire, with hat, fine shoes and the general appearance of decent persons. [807](#)

806 William E. French, "Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work, and the Family," chap. 4 in French, *Peaceful and Working People*, 87-108.

807 *Ibid.*, Dec. 24, 1905, 11.

For the *Gaceta* and the language of respectability it employed, females who committed criminal acts were an abomination of the natural order. As women served the role of both biological and social reproduction in modernizing societies, their aberrant behaviour threatened not only the health and stability of themselves, but also that of their family and their country. As Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato have noted, in the

international competition among nation-states prior to World War I, such acts by women amounted to treason against the State. [808](#)

Finally, although the *Gaceta* warned that shoplifters originated from most of the social spectrum its greatest contempt and photographic coverage were not for the poorest-looking criminals but rather for those passing as members of the *gente decente*. This leads to the final transgressive act of shoplifters so increasingly central in the modern world: a crime of consumption. This concern, too, should be approached as part of the larger transatlantic elite concern with the decline of national vigour and morality.

Shoplifting threatened the precarious logical foundations of Porfirian progress. For Porfirian society consumption was inextricably connected with modernity. The flood of commodities, new institutions of leisure and consumption, and a higher material standard of living for many coincided with the rapid and wrenching social, economic and cultural changes associated with modernity sweeping Mexico. Understandably the mixed impact of these transformative influences resulted in ambiguous feelings towards “progress” so well 808 Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato, “Tales of Two Women: The Narrative Construal of Porfirian Reality,”

The Americas 55, no. 3 (January 1999): 417. This notion of individual acts influencing the health and welfare of the larger social organism—the nation—is a central tenet of modernity, thus the influence of nineteenth century societies in particular to create a virtuous citizenry through public education, morality and manners, surveillance, and patterns of consumption. For more on this idea, see Robert M. Buffington and William E.

French, “The Culture of Modernity,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William H.

Beezley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); French, *A Peaceful and Working People*; Pablo Piccato, *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and Robert Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

documented by cultural and social historians of Mexico in the past two decades. [809](#) This ambiguity found expression in public commentary on consumption or, more often, on its contemporary synonym of “luxury.” Like the notion of progress itself, Porfirians did not outright condemn consumption but rather like their counterparts to the north and across the Atlantic they sought to manage consumption, to harness it in the service of the national drive to modernize both the economy and culture. The participation in a budding consumer society became a duty of citizenship in the nation state. In Mexico the constant criticism of Indians as non-consumers and therefore both a drag on economic and cultural progress starkly expresses this reality of the consumer-citizen identity in the modern nation. [810](#)

Fears of the impact of consumerist values in Mexico mirrored those held by much of the European bourgeois class. These included perceptions of national and class moral decay as well as the ghastly possibility of blurred social distinctions threatened by the so-called democratization of luxury. Thus we see in Mexico a version of what Warren G. Breckman has described in the Wilhelmine German context as a distinction between productive and unproductive consumption. This vision held that in order to be good, “consumption of the individual should balance his productive power”; if it did not, such consumption became

“luxury” and therefore should be labelled socially undesirable. [811](#) In the worldview of the gente decente the survival of a modern nation required that a new consumer ethic must be balanced by a work ethic.

809 Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, initiated this line of analysis. Since then a variety of studies have amplified this seminal work.

810 In the press, see *El Imparcial*, Aug. 17, 1897, 1; and Dec. 6, 1898, 1. For a more private account of such beliefs, see Rafael Reyes Spindola to José Yves Limantour, Mexico City, Sept. 22, 1893, CDLIV 1883-1899, Roll 12, Carp. 44, Archivo José Yves Limantour, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México CONDUMEX, Chimalistac, Mexico City (hereafter cited as JYL-CONDUMEX). In this correspondence, Reyes Spindola supports a proposal to increase drastically (180%) the tariff on “manta”—the cheap cotton cloth associated with Indian consumers—because “it would contribute to federal revenues to which the Indians never contribute. . .”

811 Breckman, “Disciplining Consumption,” 490.

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Public diatribes on property theft in Mexico City reveal this ideology in the rawest form. Besides the usual calls to whip thieves, journalists decried the fact that such criminals passed “short vacations” in jail eating better inside than out. [812](#) How to turn these unproductive leisured consumers into productive members of society became the rallying cry of criminal reformers. Reformers and eventually lawmakers decided that forced work offered the solution. In 1904 new legislation in the Penal Code changed the penalty for theft from three days in Belén prison to five or six months of hard labour, often in the dreaded *Valle Nacional* and other unsalubrious agricultural zones. [813](#) In *El Imparcial* a columnist noted that crime had dropped considerably after one month of the new law with a dramatic decline among those “dressed respectably.” [814](#) He continued that the usual poor and dirty criminals did not have much to worry about forced labour, that such individuals were accustomed to such a condition in their miserable lives. Rather the “*ratero elegante*, he that commits robberies to sustain a life of dissipation, almost of opulence, has almost completely disappeared because for him the punishment of the new Code is too hard.” Although overly optimistic on the decline of the *elegante* the columnist and his glee represent the common sentiment among his class towards those committing

the paired transgressive crimes of status misrepresentation and illegal consumption.

Writ large, this world view insisted that the advancement of the nation state required the balancing of national and personal consumption with production capabilities.

Consumption in a natural equilibrium, what I would call “proper consumption” or 812 On meals-included vacations see *La Semana Mercantil*, Sept. 4, 1893, 426-427. Other articles in the same paper advocating the lash for thievery include Oct. 9, 1893, 486; and Apr. 23, 1894, 198-199. For another source, see *L’Echo du Mexique*, Mar. 30, 1894, 2, which promotes adding the shaving of heads to the call for whipping.

813 *La Semana Mercantil* had championed for years this solution for Mexico’s apparent wave of crime. See, for example, the article on Nov. 27, 1899, 662, in which it calls for turning these illegal consumers into producers

“at agricultural labours in the National Valley and other locations.”

814 *El Imparcial*, Feb. 5, 1904, 1.

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consumption proper to one’s place in society, could serve the interests of an abstract “nation”

as well as social harmony in the maintenance of class distinctions.

Excessive consumption could be disastrous. The great fear of nineteenth century bourgeois society was the threat to the stability of social identities and to larger issues of hierarchy and order in society. First of all, by the second half of the nineteenth century the bourgeoisie became preoccupied by the precariousness of its position within society. In Europe, a work ethic

had historically distinguished this class from the aristocracy and their economic power had yielded the eventual social, political, and cultural clout that made them the dominant social class of the nineteenth century and their interests, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with those of the nation state. But this ethic brought the money that led not only to the possibility of higher consumption to express conspicuously their social position but also the danger that subsequent generations may become the same unproductive, dandified *rentier* class indistinguishable from the early aristocracy from which they had distanced themselves. [815](#) This same anxiety circulated through Mexican social circles even though in Mexico the social dynamics were far different. There the middling classes were far smaller and weaker, less independent, and considerably more dependent on government rather than business for their elevated social station. Although public discourse occasionally positioned the middling classes as the productive backbone of the nation many of the ruling elite looked upon them contemptuously compared to their European counterparts. Most telling is President Díaz's description of this class and what he considered their excessive consumption:

They wake up late, being public employees with patrons of influence, attend their work without punctuality, call in sick often . . . never miss bullfights, seek endless diversions . . . they marry young and have unlimited numbers of children, spending 815 Breckman, "Disciplining Consumption," 489.

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more than they earn and indebt themselves to usurers to pay for holiday celebrations and birthday parties [saint's days]. [816](#)

This internal conflict over self-definition—as primarily leisured consumers or as producers—infused bourgeois concerns internationally.

Secondly, the middling classes feared the working classes from which many of them were no more than a generation or two removed and by no means permanently so depending on their economic fortunes. In Mexico the comparatively small size of the *gente decente* [817](#)

and the fear of the *población flotante*—the floating population of migrant labour that flowed into cities and travelled throughout the Republic on the rail system—made these fears even more disturbing. Besides the fears of physical harm the concern of blurring the lines between classes occupied top billing in the list of middle class anxieties. Emulative consumption or the copying of one's "betters" was not a new phenomenon. In fact, the bourgeoisie of early centuries had experienced the public humiliation and often prison sentences mandated by the sumptuary legislation passed by the aristocracy that prohibited the upstart merchant and professional class from displaying certain commodities such as the colour purple. Changes in attitude changes, liberal legal codes, and the "democratization" of luxury promoted by leaders of retailing made such *de jure* sanctions impossible. Whether or not the emulative consumption of the Porfiriato was an exercise in social climbing through imitation or more of a challenge remains debatable. In any case, *gente decente* society sought to institute a *de facto* class distinction in consumption as it patrolled the boundaries of proper consumption through articles in the press about *gauche* interlopers and in innumerable daily encounters ⁸¹⁶ Moisés González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, vol. 4 of *Historia Moderna de México*, ed. Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 389.

⁸¹⁷ One estimate of middle class demographics numbers them as just under 8% nationally and 30% in urban areas. José E. Iturriaga, *La Estructura Social y Cultural de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951), quoted in González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, 389.

between individuals passing spoken and unspoken judgement upon those who crossed invisible lines of sartorial acceptability. In *El Mundo Ilustrado* one such public denouncement comes from a writer recounting his recent train trip with a companion. He describes the boarding of a young women “attired in a magnificent toilette” whose ruse crumbles as soon as she speaks, upon which “we noted that her education did not correspond to her dress.” Continuing, he relays that he found out that she is a seamstress going to the house of a relative where she was to be the *madrina* (godmother) at a baptism. This remark

“obliged us to exchange among ourselves an ironic smile” because her toilette was not at all appropriate for the occasion as “it was not in relation to her resources; it was truly the toilette of a duchess.” He concludes with this advice or warning to his readers: “When it comes to clothing, it is necessary not to depart from the following rule: Dress yourself according to your age and position.” [818](#)

Family and particularly women served as the connective links for class, consumption, and the nation state in the dominant cultural framework of nineteenth century bourgeois society. As outlined previously in an excerpt from the *Gaceta* certain particular characteristics of women made them the soul of family life. They provided the love, moral education, household economy administration, and, increasingly, the consumption requirements of the home. Women in Mexico and elsewhere, therefore, possessed a weighty social role given that bourgeois society considered the family the building blocks of the nation. [819](#)

818 *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Aug. 25, 1901, 16-17.

819 French, *Peaceful and Working People*, 87-108; Carmen Ramos Escandón, “Gender Construction in a Progressive Society: Mexico, 1870-1917,” *Texas Papers on Mexico*, no. 90-07 (Austin: Mexican Center, Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas, 1990). For the United States and the influence of Republicanism on this process, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and

Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). For 302

The dark side of the feminine character was its supposed taste for luxury. For centuries women have been viewed as more susceptible to luxury and more recently the ever-changing dictates of fashion. By Porfirian Mexico the average household, particularly the urban one, provisioned itself less from home production in favour of the ease, quality, and abundance offered by the market. Women, in charge of the household economy, were largely charged with entering this public realm to fulfill their domestic duties. [820](#)

Consumption hardened as a feminine trait while productive activities solidified as masculine.

Nowhere is this Porfirian language of gendered consumption more transparent than in the press which offered up as regular fare the trope that men were incapable of shopping. In articles such as "The Purchase of Fabrics" the social observer notes that sometimes men, "out of gallantry or to help their spouse" take it upon themselves to purchase the fabrics required by the house but few understand the task at hand and "it can be almost guaranteed that their purchase is always expensive and of poor quality." A women, on the other hand, "educated in such niceties, makes a better and less expensive purchase." [821](#) In one of the many contradictions found in the Porfirian social vision, this praise for feminine skill and thrift butted against their assumed weakness for luxury. This weakness, combined with the appearance of department stores, boutiques, and commercialized entertainment districts in urban centres led to the vociferously expressed fear that their desire and capacity to consume might imperil their ability to manage the household economy.

France, one study is Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

820 Carmen Ramos Escandón, “Señoritas Porfirianas: Mujer y ideología en el México progresista, 1880-1910,”

in *Presencia y transparencia: La mujer en la historia de México*, ed. Carmen Ramos Escandón (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1987), 143-161.

821 *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Jan. 13, 1900, 18.

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Only a strong moral core could prevent the love of finery and consumption from ruining a woman and her family both economically and morally. Such concerns appeared in the pages of etiquette and religious manuals⁸²² but abundantly flowed from articles in newspapers. Ironically, these newspapers counselled restraint on one page while on the next they actively promoted the latest clothing or home furnishing styles. What serves to unify this apparent contradiction was the emphasis on proper, class-specific consumption. “The clothing that family members wear must be in harmony with their means and with their social position” sternly warned one article before focusing blame on the core of the family turned rotten, namely mothers “who excite the vanity of their daughters, instilling pernicious needs, fomenting in them a passion that can drive them towards vice.”⁸²³ A parallel theme of feminine vanity was that of the newlywed couple. Brides received constant admonishment in the press to not exceed the budgets of their husbands as they furnished their new homes.

In “The Selection and Arrangement of the Home” the expert in home decoration advises and warns readers to beware easy credit payment options and the desire for excessively luxurious furniture. “Preferable is a modest set of furnishings representative of your resources which can be improved as your husband’s fortunes improve.”⁸²⁴ Porfirian literature echoed this theme with cautionary tales such as *La Mujer Económica* in which a man recounts how his bride and mother-in-law tricked him into believing her

thrifty but now seeks to match the conspicuous consumption of her other married friends. Another example is *Un Secreto de* 822 An example of a Roman Catholic assault on growing materialism and the role of women is R. P. V. Marchal, *La Mujer Perfecta* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1908), 159-161, and 163 in particular. Useful etiquette manuals widely used in Mexico include those for women [La Condesa de Tramar, *El Trato Social: costumbres de la sociedad moderna en todas las circunstancias de la vida* (Mexico City: Lib. de la Vda. De Ch. Bouret, 1906)]

and for men [*Nuevo manual de urbanidad, cortesanía, decoro y etiqueta ó el hombre fino* (Madrid: Lib. de Hijos de D. J. Cuesta, 1889)].

823 *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Dec. 1, 1901, 21. Again, illustrations of furniture and clothing fashions cram the pages surrounding this article as well as the facing page. Another exceptional article rapping women who dress beyond their economic and social station may be found in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, Sept. 9, 1900, 14.

824 *Ibid.*, Dec. 29, 1901, 14.

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Casada, the plight of young housewife who nearly runs her husband into debt by her slavish devotion to fashion and the Jewish-French *modiste* who supplies her vanity. [825](#)

Throughout this internal discourse of the gente decente the themes of consumption, class, gender, and morality interweave. An essential fragility of the morality and socioeconomic fortunes of the individual and family underpins the conversation and underscores the insecurity felt by much of respectable society. Women are presented as the linchpins of this social and moral order and therefore the weakest link.

Shoplifting became such a lightning rod issue for Porfirians because it realized these fears of the *gente decente*. It allowed to surface anxieties over the shape of society which they were creating. Onto shoplifters, especially *cruzadoras*, Porfirians projected their fears of the place and morality of women, the stability and distinguishability of social classes and order, and the precariousness of public space for “civilized” society seemingly threatened and surrounded by forces of chaotic backwardness. That these concerns should focus on the act of consumption and in locations such as the department store only makes sense for a class so proud of their material culture and the goods which made their values concrete. If one accepts that the nineteenth-century state—like the department store—reflected the values and goals of respectable society then the act of shoplifting may be seen as questioning the assumptions of the whole national modernization project. The Porfirian motto of “Order and Progress” manifested the *gente decente* ideal; that shoplifters successfully hijacked the commodities, cultural education, and institutions of this progress and brought disorder to order deeply threatened believers in the perfectability of modern society.

825 Both of these short stories come from *Novelas cortas de varios autores*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: V. Agueros, 1901).

Death by a Thousand Cuts

Shoplifters were not the only threats to department stores. Shoplifters delivered but one of a thousand cuts by which these institutions of the gente decente suffered injury to their financial bottom-line and public reputation. [826](#) Many of the thefts illustrated how criminals adapted to the world of Porfirian progress.

The practice of home-delivery service coupled with C.O.D. (Cash-On-Delivery) or deferred payment provided numerous opportunities for the crude theft or clever swindle.

Among the former were the two men who overheard a delivery order, raced to the house on Avenida Juárez, greeted the female employee bringing the goods, then stole the clothes valued at nearly \$500 pesos. [827](#) An example of the latter comes from the swindle conducted against the *Centro Mercantil* in 1906. “Two men of industry, extremely elegant in dress and bearing, with ostentation and sumptuous jewelry” selected \$700 pesos worth of bronzes and other *objet d’art* and asked that they be delivered to a hotel on Independencia whereupon they would pay for the goods. An employee brought the sculptures to the men in the hotel lobby at which point one offered to guard the goods while the other ordered the boy to accompany him to his office where he would be paid. En route to the fictitious office, the swindler separated from the employee in the boulevard crowd. Returning to the hotel the employee found the goods and the customers gone. [828](#)

The considerable value of goods in transport throughout the city proved irresistible not only to thieves preying on the delivery agents but often even to those agents themselves: [826](#) A sampling of newspaper reports on shoplifting in department stores includes: *El Imparcial*, Feb. 1, 1900, 2; Sept. 25, 1901, 2; Oct. 13, 1904, 3; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 2, 1900, 2; Dec. 16, 1900, 3; *L’Echo du Mexique*, May 10, 1896, 2; July 7, 1896, 2; May 7, 1897, 2; May 9, 1897, 2; and Dec. 21, 1905, 2.

[827](#) *El Imparcial*, Mar. 4, 1899, 2.

828 *Ibid.*, Feb. 7, 1906, 5; and *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 8, 1906, 3. This common form of swindle can be seen a decade earlier in a similar crime against the Palacio de Hierro documented in *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 8, 1906, 3.

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stories of licensed *cargadores* (porters) commissioned by department stores never arriving at their destination were not unusual. [829](#) Assaults on *cobradores* or collectors who travelled to the homes of customers throughout the city collecting payments stung establishments of all sizes. These collectors, often well known, were out in force on Saturdays and on the 15th of every month and made easy targets. Since they received payments in cash they often carried thousands of pesos in banknotes in their pocketbooks. As a response stores encouraged the use of cheques to reduce the attractiveness of their employees as targets. [830](#)

Warehouses located in the city were another point in the distribution pipeline besides stores themselves from which thieves could siphon off goods. Employees at the warehouses often supplemented their incomes with bonuses in kind much the same way that dockworkers and others regularly pilfered the goods that passed through their workplace. More spectacular and newsworthy were the cases such as the crime committed at the warehouses of the Centro Mercantil in the spring of 1901. Two friends recently fired from their department store jobs formed the nucleus of the gang involved. One, Margarito Reyes, had just lost his job at the Centro Mercantil warehouse and the other, Vicente Jay, left the employ of the Oriental clothing store located under the Portal de las Flores. They invited a maintenance technician from the Telegraph Office and another man to join them in a heist of thousands of dollars worth of merchandise from Reyes' former employer. After taking a coach to the warehouse they gained admittance upon telling the guards that they were looking for a broken telegraph wire on the roof. The telegraph technician's uniform had "served to inspire confidence" and the other three accomplices merely posed as

assistants. Once on the roof they broke the locks on the roof door. Gaining access to the merchandise areas they stole 829 See the case in *El Imparcial*, Mar. 4, 1905, 3, in which a cargador walked off with almost \$600 pesos in merchandise from the Importador store.

830 *La Semana Mercantil*, Feb. 11, 1907, 70-71.

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seven crates of silk ties, shirts, cashmere goods and other costly items. Eventually caught more than two months later, the four revealed where they had sold many of the goods including the Merced and San Juan markets. A significant portion of the goods were recovered in the possession of Jay who, it turned out, had been stealing from his employer for some time and hoarding the items with the idea of opening his own clothing store. [831](#)

Inside the department stores con artists and other thieves teamed up with employees to fleece owners. Illustrative is the case of one swindler described as 25 years old with the appearance of a “gentleman of industry, dressed with tasteful elegance and fine jewelry” who robbed department stores with the help of employees. On holidays when stores closed at noon he would plan for an employee to let him in through a service door whereupon he would select then carry out “pieces of the finest silk,” and boxes of handkerchiefs, ties, scarves and other items under a large Spanish cape worn for the occasion. Authorities finally caught him not in a department store but for chatting up then robbing ladies of their travel bags on Pullman rail cars between Orizaba and the Federal District. Such information reinforces the suspicion that these “modern” criminals possessed both ample talents and an ability to adapt to—and exploit—the new technologies of progress. [832](#)

External threats to stores did not blind owners to the fact that their own employees embezzled with alacrity and needed little outside assistance. Singly or in groups, employees stole quantities ranging from the relatively

insignificant like the \$50 pesos Margarito Gútiérrez stole from the Puerto de Veracruz in 1896 to the considerable \$3000 lifted and 831 *El Imparcial*, Dec. 23, 1900, 1; Mar. 7, 1901, 2.

832 *Ibid.*, Aug. 16, 1898, 1. For another instance of employee and outsider cooperation with an emphasis on the employee, see *El Imparcial*, July 18, 1902, 3. The Página Negra section of *La Gaceta de Policia* listed numerous thieves who worked the trains not only locally but in most cases throughout the Republic: Dec. 17, 1905, 9; Dec. 24, 1905, 11; Jan. 28, 1906, 13; Feb. 4, 1906, 15; Feb. 18, 1906, 15; Oct. 7, 1906, 15, among others.

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pawned by four staff members at the Cajón de Sol in 1898. [833](#) Collaboration among employees could reach staggering numbers not only within department stores but also at other retailers such as the famous La Profesa pharmacy where 25 employees were arrested for pawning both medical supplies and more typical consumer goods. [834](#) Nor were these necessarily new or seemingly disgruntled personnel; high-level employees possessing both seniority and trust among management betrayed this confidence. *Cobradores*, the bill-collectors mentioned earlier, occasionally decided that the receipts of the day offered an early and comfortable retirement and disappeared from town. In two representative examples, the *Centro Mercantil* lost \$1,650 pesos and *La Valenciana* scrambled to recover \$8,000 pesos. [835](#)

Store management obviously kept an eye on their staff and frequently caught dishonest employees who faced instant job termination, imprisonment, and likely black-listing among not only clothing stores but all retail employment opportunities offered by the tight-knit and influential French community. Two examples illustrate the surveillance techniques used by store managers. At the Palacio de Hierro Antonio Reynaud noticed that a number of objects on display were disappearing in his department. Suspecting employee involvement he instituted a system of surveillance.

Not long after he caught Porfirio Galán and Nieves Reyes in the act, called for a gendarme, and sent them off to jail. A sweep of pawnshops recovered high-end wallets, cigar boxes and silk scarves which comprised only a small portion of the overall theft believed to have been conducted over a period of months. [836](#)

At the Nuevo Mundo store a young Spaniard named Eloy Castillo parlayed a number of glowing letters of reference into a job as counter clerk. Within days his supervisor suspected [833](#) *L'Echo du Mexique*, May 38, 1896, 2; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, May 18, 1898, 2. For an even earlier account see *L'Echo du Mexique*, June 8, 1893, 4.

[834](#) *L'Echo du Mexique*, Nov. 16, 1895, 2.

[835](#) *El Imparcial*, Jan. 12, 1900, 2; *L'Echo du Mexique*, May 4, 1895, 2.

[836](#) *L'Echo du Mexique*, May 1, 1894, 2.

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him of giving out *á vistas* (items loaned for home inspection) to unknown persons which did not return to the store. Furthering the suspicions of his boss, Castillo rapidly upgraded his clothing and “appeared to be spending considerable sums which surely exceeded his salary.”

The supervisor then caught him in the act of hiding thirteen expensive scarves between several shirts to fill an *á vistas* order in which Castillo had documented only the shirts. Upon interrogation Castillo maintained his innocence until another employee informed on him. [837](#)

Despite the efforts of supervisors the losses to employee theft continued. Clearly the much-vaunted and generally valid reputation of family unity in Barcelonnette stores had disappeared by the last decade of the Porfiriato. Perhaps Thomas Edison’s invention in 1910

of an automated salesclerk to replace human employees in clothing stores best reflected the international extent of frustration in an age when technology promised to address and solve the problems of the day. [838](#)

Breaking the Mould

The public fascination and frustration with department store theft must be placed in the context of contemporary thinking about national development in Mexico. As in the North Atlantic nations such as the United States, France, Germany, and Britain which served as global models of economic and cultural emulation, Mexican respectable society possessed the sense that its modernizing efforts were beset on all sides by destabilizing and backward elements of society. National and, indeed, general human progress entailed a cultural war.

Criminal activity, perceived as welling up from traditional elements of society, served as one of several focal points for these concerns of social instability.

837 *El Imparcial*, Dec. 5, 1901, 2.

838 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, June 6, 1910, 2.

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By 1890 Porfirian leaders and social commentators believed Mexico was in the midst of a crime wave. The 1895 census provided the statistical grist for a budding Mexican criminology publishing mill which shrilly pronounced that homicide rates in Mexico dwarfed those experienced by European societies. [839](#) Equally disturbing was the quadrupling of property crime rates between 1885 and 1895. [840](#) The press echoed comments like those of the *Semana Mercantil* in 1891, noting the “marked and perceptible worsening of criminality in the capital.” [841](#) Those concerned viewed

pockets of respectability and urban progress like downtown as besieged on all sides by criminal elements from the lower classes. This perspective envisioned the worst elements of Traditional Mexico trying to destroy a budding Modern Mexico. In response, Díaz's government reformed and reinforced the police forces, prison institutions, and the penal codes. ⁸⁴² Government leaders such as Finance Minister José Yves Limantour stocked their libraries with books on the subject with the hopes of finding a solution. ⁸⁴³

It was not supposed to be this way. Since the Restored Republic under Benito Juárez and Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada liberal idealism had combined with the influence of positivism in offering the hope that crime could be abolished as a result of the inexorable ⁸³⁹ See Miguel Macedo, *La criminalidad en México: medios de combatirla* (Mexico City: Oficina tip. de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1897). On page 23, for example, he notes that homicides per 100,000 residents in Mexico City were 100 compared to 7.6 for Madrid. See González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, 427, for the confusion and likely error in these numbers. For an excellent account of how public policy and police practices can strongly influence criminal statistics, see Pablo Piccato, "Cuidado con los Rateros: The Making of Criminals in Modern Mexico City," in *Crime and Punishment in Latin America: Law and Society Since Late Colonial Times*, eds. Ricardo D. Salvatore, Carlos Aguirre, and Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁸⁴⁰ Macedo, *Criminalidad en México*, 40.

⁸⁴¹ *La Semana Mercantil*, June 1, 1891, 256-257.

⁸⁴² Laurence Rohlfs, "Police and Penal Correction in Mexico City, 1876-1911: A Study of Order and Progress in Porfirian Mexico," (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1983); Robert Buffington, "Forging the Fatherland: Criminality and Citizenship in Modern Mexico" (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1994).

843 *Catálogo de la Biblioteca del Señor Licenciado don José Y. Limantour* (Mexico City: n.p., 1913). Volumes from experts abroad such as the Italian Cesar Lombroso and Frenchman Paul Dubuisson mingled with Mexican criminologists like Miguel Macedo, Julio Guerrero and Carlos Roumagnac.

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forward march of humanity. Crime was supposed to be antithetical to the world of progress, an irreconcilable combination as insoluble as vinegar and water. By the Porfiriato this utopian idealism had morphed into the colder utilitarianism of social Darwinism to provide the dominant elite foundation for understanding crime.

Herbert Spencer developed social Darwinism by adapting Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories to fit human society. He popularized the phrase "survival of the fittest," offering an attractive theory to many Mexican rulers to justify their program of laissez-faire economic development, social differentiation, and disdain for the lower classes and Indian populations. "Survival of the fittest" granted them a convenient lens through which to view the abject poverty and misery of the popular classes as an example of natural selection, of weak traits genetically destined to perish for their inability to adapt to new conditions.

Their criminological model embodied these social Darwinist beliefs. Despite the statistical fact that, historically, criminal behaviour in Mexico had cut across social and ethnic lines, criminologists such as Miguel Macedo, Julio Guerrero, and Carlos Roumagnac had knit together criminology theories from Europe and the United States to provide social

and hereditary explanations for lower-class criminality in the capital. The argument ran as follows: lower classes committed the vast majority of crimes due to their depraved moral character influenced by broken homes, disease, alcohol and drug abuse, and promiscuous sexuality. Characteristically they carried out their crimes spontaneously when they were drunk, passionate, and desperate; they acted with little foresight. Moreover, according to Macedo, “personal experience” teaches that violent crimes “are almost all committed by individuals of the lower class against individuals of the same class.” Julio Guerrero perceived 312

criminals to represent the pathetic failures in the Darwinist struggles for life, “unable to resist the continuous, enervating influences of the physical and social milieu . . . who finally become obstacles for the other members of society. In their weakness they have lost any sense of collective action or responsibility.” [844](#) In short, the typical Mexican criminal was imagined as male, lower class, Indian or mestizo, of low intelligence, and acting alone. He was often inebriated and in a moment of passion he committed a violent act, usually “over a woman or a centavo,” as one newspaper opined. [845](#)

This model, already under assault, reached a critical point by the mid-1890s with the establishment of department stores and the ascent of shoplifting as a central narrative of the mass-circulation press. The spotlight on department store criminality in turn held attention on the fragility of this conventional elite model of crime. Non-violent, sober, and premeditated, crimes such as shoplifting involved the acquisition of goods and material wealth. With characteristics, causation, and aims completely different than a violent crime against an individual, a sophisticated property crime committed against a business institution appeared to represent a society in transition.

Crime seemed to be reflecting the economic, social and cultural changes wrought by the Mexican development projects of the Restored Republic and the government of Díaz.

Crime patterns reflected the fact that criminals go where the money is. During the Porfiriato this increasingly transferred the bulk of property

crime incidence from the countryside to the city. Díaz used the laying of a national transportation and communication infrastructure to 844 Macedo, *Criminalidad en México*, 6; Julio Guerrero, *La génesis del crimen en México: ensayo de psiquiatria social* (Mexico City: Imprenta de la Vda de Ch. Bouret, 1901), xi-xii; Roumagnac, *Los criminales en México*.

845 *El Imparcial*, Mar. 10, 1902, 1.

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enforce a crackdown on rural banditry. 846 At the same time, Mexico City's historically central commercial, political, and religious role in national life was only elevated by trends of urbanization, industrialization, and a rising consumer society with its greater emphasis on material goods as social and cultural markers. Together this concentration of accessible wealth in the windows and behind the counters of stores made rising property crime an obvious eventuality.

Following another trend, these criminals appeared to be organizing. *Cruzadoras* and *elegantes* often acted in teams. Newspapers warned of the appearance of organized gangs of such thieves. In 1904, *El Imparcial* fretted in an editorial entitled "Criminal Industries" that these gangs were formed by individuals "who appeared well dressed, well-mannered and who can easily have access to locations frequented by distinguished people, which makes them even more dangerous." 847 This organizing and—equally important—professionalizing of the trade may have merely reflected the fears of the press. Even so, it projected an impression of a modernizing world of crime that duplicated the organizing trends in labour (unions) and in business (trusts, oligopolies) that dominated business news and social critiques of the late-nineteenth century in Mexico as well as the United States and Europe.

The fear of an organized class of thieves also reflects the larger economic and cultural trend towards professionalization and specialization. If

industrial standardization and assembly-line business models could impact blue-collar and white-collar jobs, why not a modernizing criminal class?

[848](#)

846 Paul Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1992).

847 *Ibid.*, June 25, 1904, 1.

848 T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

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The image of so many women shoplifters mirrored social changes as well as stereotypes. Women during the Porfiriato became increasingly public not only in their capacity as consumers in the commercial and entertainment zone of the city but also in the filling of the ranks of factory workers (whether working the cigarette rolling machines at El Buen Tono or the sewing machines at the Palacio de Hierro workshops) and low-level white-collar positions such as telephone operators and typists. Conventional wisdom held that they were better suited than men for tasks that involved repetition, patience, and attention to detail. It only made sense that within the criminal world shoplifting—with its requirement of finesse, forethought, and a dose of captivating charm—would naturally appear most suitable to the fairer sex.

Finally, the issue of clothing and class transgression by shoplifters signalled a profound social conflict and shifting within the attitudes of the Mexican public. The outrage expressed by social commentators (and thrill likely

experienced by many readers) suggests the remarkable sense of fragility many Porfirians perceived in the traditional social order and visible social boundaries. Shoplifting became a lightning rod for this issue. Perhaps this mimics democratic trends in European (and North American) societies such as France where many refused to participate in proper rituals of deference to their social superiors. [849](#) In addition, the rise of ever-larger cities raised the question of how to mark one's place in society for public consumption. This question took on added consequence for a city such as Mexico's capital in which heavy immigration of rural populations rendered a homogenous population impossible. To accomplish this task of social distinction required a heavy reliance upon external markers such as etiquette, bearing, and particularly clothing. But as 849 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1870-1914), especially 264-277, 289-291.

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the cruzadoras and elegantes so amply demonstrated, clothing could be easily copied and shifting fashions faithfully followed even by those without unlimited funds. More disturbingly, etiquette and bearing could also be hijacked. In this light, shoplifters were so wildly fascinating to the broader public because they showed just how fluid society had become and how easily alternate identities could be assumed in relatively anonymous modern urban zones of the nation.

Beyond these departures signalled by department store crimes, the characterization of the average, violent, feeble-minded criminal seemed to clash with a series of audacious property crimes that reached the highest echelons of the Porfirian regime. President Díaz himself suffered the theft of a sizeable quantity of jewels from his house in 1894. Other notable crime victims included Secretary of War Bernardo Reyes (cheque and signature

forgery), prominent businessman and brother of the Finance Minister Julio Limantour (burglary of home), and chief of the Rurales police force José Benavides, the latter having fallen victim to a pickpocket at a police banquet given in honour of President Díaz. Even the chief of the secret police, Miguel Cabrera, had to resort to chasing down a thief who stole his horse's saddle from his home. [850](#)

By the beginning of the twentieth century a competing crime narrative was developing. Famous academics spurred this new narrative, not least the startling observation made in 1895 by French sociologist Émile Durkheim that crime is normal in society, “an integral part of all healthy societies.” [851](#) In Mexico, this new explanation of crime linked the nation's economic and social modernization with a refinement of crime defined most notably [850](#) *L'Echo du Mexique*, July 9, 1894, 2; *La Gaceta de Policia*, Jan. 28, 1906, 13; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Apr.

11, 1900, 2; *L'Echo du Mexique*, May 8, 1894; and Jan. 3, 1897, 2.

[851](#) Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, trans. Sarah A. Salovay and Hohn M. Mueller, 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 65-73.

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as a shift from violent crime to property crime. [852](#) In 1904, newspaper *El Imparcial*, responding to a slickly executed store robbery, noted that “In the good old days, robbery was generally accompanied by violence. . . Now robbery has been civilized and has shed itself of its once brutal character.” [853](#) Another paper described how as Mexico's wealth increased, violent robberies diminished, having given way to the ingenious and subtle robbery common in affluent societies that distinguishes the progress of nations.” [854](#) The article continues in this vein, depicting Mexico City as a veritable

candy store for the crafty criminal, attributing the capital's social importance, immense wealth, and profusion of commercial establishments as the cause of Mexico's new immigration "crime artists." The penny press paper *El Diablito Rojo* summed up this new vision best when it wrote "One of the manifestations of today's progress is, as they say, the refinement of vice." [855](#)

852 This perceived transition from "*violence au vol*" (violence to theft) with the onset of modernization anticipated the most enduring paradigm found today in the history of criminology. This later twentieth century approach is more sophisticated than most approaches to nineteenth century urban environments which viewed cities as chaotic jungles seething with crime, disorder and vice. It discounts the notion that urban growth breeds social disorganization and anomie, crime and popular disorder. Tossed out at the same time is the causal dichotomy of crime as either "greed or need." Instead it looks at increased opportunities for crime in the city, the greater difficulty of crime solutions in a larger community, and the replacement of old "rural" value systems by a newer set of modern "urban" values. Modernizing urban crime characterized by property theft rather than violence is not a product of normlessness caused by the urbanization process but rather the adopting of new norms to fit the new environment. As many observe, the majority of property theft is not committed by recent immigrants to the city but rather by those already comfortable in the environment. "Greed or need" become relative, the sense of deprivation in the city's complex social and economic structure is relative rather than absolute. Crucial to their argument and, I believe, for understanding the changes occurring in Porfirian Mexico City, people may steal because they are in need, but the assessment of need depends upon what they have been led to expect to desire. This theory of relative deprivation is central to the modernizing crime theory and is commonly called the Merton-Gurr argument as one of the most widely acclaimed examples of the use of the theory as an explanation for social action is Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). The clearest and most convincing application of the modernizing crime theory is Howard Zehr, *Crime and the Development of Modern Society: Patterns of Criminality in*

Nineteenth-Century Germany and France (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1976), especially pages 79-81. This theory is generally considered European in origin and has acquired detractors. Most commonly this criticism comes from academics in the United States who point out the violence in American cities during the 1970s and 1980s suggests the weakness of the *violence au vol* argument. Interestingly, they often use European case studies to make their point. For the best of these arguments, see Eric A. Johnson, *Urbanization and Crime: Germany 1871-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

853 “El código penal y las nuevas sociedades: El robo y la civilización,” *El Imparcial*, July 8, 1904, 1.

854 “Criminales modernistas,” *El Imparcial*, July 18, 1904, 1.

855 “El peligro del progreso,” *El Diablito Rojo*, July 13, 1908, 2.

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Newspapers now trumpeted how criminals seemed to adopt the latest technology and turn it against society. Using article titles such as “New Form of Robbery” and “New Genre of Theft” [856](#) the press informed the public on how criminals used chloroform, the telephone, and even the camera to commit ever more daring crimes. [857](#) Cinemas in the city catered to the public’s appetite for the subject, screening films such as “The History of Crime.” [858](#)

An indicator of how much the Mexican elite and press embraced this new notion of modernizing crime came in their reporting of similar crimes abroad. Reflecting their identity as a postcolonial society with

extraordinarily intense pretensions of “catching up” with the most advanced global civilizing nations, [859](#) they often sought to compare the symmetry of events at home with those taking place in Europe and the United States. Comparisons of transportation systems, fashions, shopping venues, financial institutions, and sports events now made room for those on crime. International reports of spectacular crimes or crime trends found their place in Mexican newspapers as a comforting indication that—although vexing—the “modernization” and increase in property crime at home merely demonstrated that national progress continued in lockstep with global leaders. Thus dispatches from New York on department store shoplifting not only informed Mexican readers that these criminals stole over \$500,000 annually and that police estimated that the “weaker sex” comprised over 95% of their ranks; they also subtly paralleled similar reports on domestic affairs. [860](#)

Now the press adopted a bifurcated approach to crime reporting. While it sensationalized modern crimes (thefts of property, premeditated, requiring modern

856 *El Imparcial*, Oct. 24, 1900, 2; *L’Echo du Mexique*, Mar. 10, 1894, 2.

857 *El Imparcial*, July 21, 1904, 1; June 17, 1903, 1; *Le Courrier du Mexique*, Feb. 15, 1901, 3. Examples of other revelations of new crimes include *L’Echo du Mexique*, Nov. 9, 1897, 2; *El Imparcial*, Aug. 14, 1904, 3.

858 *Le Courrier du Mexique*, June 14, 1903, 2.

859 Arnold Bauer and Benjamin Orlove, *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

860 *El Imparcial*, Nov. 24, 1904, 3.

behaviours and often technologies) it carried on reporting the usual random and violent criminal acts—murder, drunkenness, assaults—that were considered representative of “Old Mexico.” What this new model of crime achieved was a two-tiered vision of crime that mirrored the elite social Darwinian vision of society: Modern versus Traditional; evolving and advancing versus stagnating and dying. In essence, this new narrative patched the cognitive dissonance experienced by respectable society as the press increasingly reported crime that departed from the received wisdom of conventional criminal behaviour, crime that often embodied and employed the values, skills, and technologies for which progressive Mexicans believed in. It involved discarding the notion that one day society would progress beyond crime, but then celebrity academics like Durkheim had already paved the way for that. Most importantly, it permitted elites to retain their cherished social Darwinian perception of national development.

This chapter urges historians to rethink previous assumptions of crime and crime narratives in Porfirian Mexico. This is not to say that earlier interpretations have not linked crime with Porfirian modernization, but usually the modernization involves government responses to the problem (police, legal, and institutional reforms) or else readings of public narratives surrounding famous cases that offer a window into the tensions that rapid social change inflicted. [861](#) Building upon these earlier works and approaching the subject through the lens of consumer institutions and the values they promoted and represented I have forwarded the idea of a modernizing crime narrative developing by the turn of the century [861](#) Buffington and Piccato, “Tales of Two Women”; James Garza, “Love, Passion, and Murder in Belle Epoque Mexico” in *Masculinity Uncut* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, forthcoming 2006); Pablo Piccato,

“El chalequero, or ‘The Mexican Jack the Ripper’: The Meaning of Sexual Violence in Turn-of-the-Century Mexico City,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 81, nos. 3-4 (2001): 623-651.

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that mirrored a broader vision of Mexican society divided into traditional and modern categories. Department store criminality and the public narratives it inspired revealed the tension if not contradiction within the Porfirian motto of “Order and Progress”: Porfirian elites wished for rapid economic and cultural modernization while retaining rigid social hierarchies which those changes by necessity threatened. Elite public responses to increasing property crime—often near hysterical and apocalyptic—undoubtedly contained a valid and genuine concern. At the same time, however, a careful reading suggests a parallel message conveyed in these narratives. For all of the criticism that department store criminality and its social transgressions threatened Porfirian society, below this surface of hysteria lay a comforting perception that this trend in criminal behaviour signalled the profundity of national progress. Keeping in mind that Porfirian Mexico was a postcolonial society whose elites drew upon foreign economic and cultural trends as benchmarks for their own efforts to

“civilize” their nation, the belief that Mexican criminality increasingly copied European and North American trends allowed for a positive interpretation. In short, such sophisticated and non-violent property crime offered solid proof of the modernization of the national culture.

If Mexican criminals—believed to be drawn from the lowest segments of society—could modernize, then there could be no doubt that Mexican society was advancing in concert with the civilizing nations of the world.

Finally, this chapter has offered a basic overview of the modernization of crime in Mexico and the economic and cultural changes that shaped the new narrative. Mostly it portrayed the narrative of Mexico's rulers although hinting at the transgressive appeal of department store criminality for a much broader segment of society. Concerns over the social consequences and messages of shoplifting and other property crime were the fears of 320

the elite in Mexico as well as Europe and the rest of North America. These intense fears of national decay amidst material and technological abundance were historically specific to *fin-de-siècle* elites of the modernizing world. Eugen Weber in his studies of France at this time notes that the majority of society did not share these fears. [862](#) Instead, broad democratic trends and freedoms impacting political, social, and cultural spheres offered a sense of personal liberation historically unheard of. Urbanization assisted this trend, and the proliferation of goods, technologies, and labour-saving machinery and devices made life far easier than rural existence had ever offered. Despite its considerable problems, city life and city jobs beckoned to many.

How to examine this in a Mexican context remains a challenge when the historiography of the period has only recently expanded beyond exclusively viewing the Porfiriato as a prelude to Revolution and more as a pivotal historical moment in the national transition to modernity. The work of Luis González offers historians an entrance into how modernization and modernity seeped into rural Mexico. In his micro-history *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition* he notes the increasing recognition and immense appeal of Porfirian Mexico City and its spectacles, inventions, and conveniences to its residents. Equally importantly he describes how the new rail system and the newspapers and goods it brought transformed expectations of residents—particularly the young—and steadily expanded their worldview and range of experience. [863](#) While this dissertation has sought to retain this line of inquiry throughout, the next chapter engages it most tightly. It considers how the robbery-murder committed at the La Profesa jewelry store in 1890 Mexico City provides a case study not only of Mexican crime on the cusp of modernization and the [862](#) Weber, *France*,

Fin de Siècle, 9-26, especially 13-14; also Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 478.

863 Luis González, *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, trans. John Upton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974). See especially Chapter 3, “The *Ranchos* and the Town (1900-1910),” 78-112.

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contesting elite and popular narratives constructed to interpret it, but also how members of the lower and lower middle-class arrived at and negotiated this modernizing urban world.

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Chapter Six

Hot Diamonds, Cold Steel:

The La Profesa Jewelry Store Robbery

Very fashionable just now are pearls. . .

--Prince Fortunatus, journalist, *Two Republics*, May 19, 1891, 4.

Among other brilliant toilettes . . . were those of Mrs. Sanchez Navarro (one of the finest in the room—ingénue dress of green and pink broche, and old point lace—wonderful jewels.)

-- *Two Republics*, May 20, 1891, 4, reporting on a ball at the Mexico City Jockey Club.

A vixen sneered at a lioness because she never bore more than one cub.

“Only one,” she replied, “but a lion.”

--Aesop[864](#)

On the night of February 20, 1891, five men, wearing five finely tailored suits, and carrying one sharp knife slashed through the patina of order and progress that Mexican elites and social reformers had cultivated and polished upon Mexican society over the preceding fifteen years of rule by President Porfirio Díaz. By brutally killing and robbing the jeweller Don Tomás Hernández Aguirre in his own store, Gerard Nevraumont, Nicolas Treffel, Anton Sousa, Jesús Bruno Martínez, and Aurelio Caballero laid bare the social and cultural tensions and intellectual currents of the rapidly modernizing Porfirian society. Although they committed only one crime together, their crime, the ensuing manhunt, the trial, and the media coverage of the event offer a vivid and comprehensive window into the relationship between crime, commodification, and modernization in Porfirian society.

Hernández undoubtedly prided himself upon his and his store's place in Porfirian society. Through his ownership of—and identification with—La Profesa, he became a well-known and well-respected family man in the community, and his nephew had even taken up 864 *Aesop's Fables*, trans. S. A. Handford (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 17.

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his trade in Guanajuato. La Profesa was not a large store, attached both physically and commercially with the enormous La Esmeralda jewelry store next door. Nevertheless, it displayed some of the finest pieces of jewelry in the city, and with La Esmeralda it helped to bedeck in sparkling wealth the most elegant ladies of Mexico City society for their appearances at the balls of the Jockey Club and other elite institutions. La Esmeralda, too, had endured since the beginning of the regime of Porfirio Díaz, sparkling as the

symbol of an increasingly materialistic and commodified culture. Other large stores existed at this time, like the Spanish-run La Elegancia dry goods two blocks to the northwest, and the French-owned Palacio de Hierro—the first of its kind in Mexico—that opened later that year; yet few came close to the sheer opulence and concentrated retailing capital that La Esmeralda and La Profesa possessed. [865](#)

Together, the two establishments housed not only watches by Longines, necklaces of pearls, and bracelets of diamonds, but also in these commodities the hopes, assumptions, and philosophies of the ruling members of Porfirian society who looked to Western Europe and North America for economic and cultural inspiration. Located on the trendy streets of Plateros and San Francisco where many of the city's wealthiest citizens lived and major businesses resided, the stores acted as a centre point of the social space Porfirian reformers sought to carve out for the middling and upper classes, the *gente decente*. In this space grew an image of society as perceived by its respectable members of society: a rationally-ordered consumer paradise free of the dangerous and criminal lower class. Here they could liberally enjoy the fruits of social order and material progress that now seemed ripe after fifteen years ⁸⁶⁵ Regarding the position of Hernández in the community and the size of his store, see *La Voz de México*, Feb.

24, 1891, 1; on the public attraction of his finest pieces see *La Voz de México*, Apr. 3, 1891, 2; and for a map of commercial interests in central Mexico City, see Enrique Krauze, *El Poder*, vol. 4 of *Porfirio* (Mexico City: Editorial Clío, 1993), 20-21.

of cultivation by the Díaz government. La Profesa and La Esmeralda represented all of this, and in 1891 they metaphorically held their place as

one of the finest jewels in the Porfirian crown. [866](#)

The Crime

That changed on the night of February 20 when the five robbers threatened to destroy this oasis of civilization. Planning had begun six months ago, but that afternoon they took care of last minute details. The dapperly dressed Martínez, Caballero, and Treffel lounged on benches in the Zócalo gardens, watching the street life pass the Monte de Piedad pawnshop and the Cathedral, waiting for Nevraumont and Sousa to finish dress at Sousa's house. That morning over breakfast, Nevraumont agreed to join the robbery. He and Sousa then picked up Nevraumont's cigarette case at his hotel before purchasing a knife, dark glasses, and a bit of wig at a *tlapalería*, or general corner store. Afterwards they lunched at Sousa's, put on suits, then pasted on false beards that Sousa's mistress, Concepción (Concha) Peña had fashioned from the wig fragment. For Nevraumont, Peña molded a piece of *chicle*, or gum, to fill in a missing tooth. She then ordered a coach and the two men picked up their partners and drove the several blocks down Cinco de Mayo, turned down La Palma, past the offices of the newspaper *El Universal*, and stopped at a small *figone*, a sidewalk stand selling food and drink, to have a glass of pulque. At six o'clock they then walked the last block and 866 On the stock carried by la Esmeralda, see *El Tiempo Ilustrado*, Aug. 9, 1891, 10; general stock carried by La Profesa, *La Voz de México*, Feb. 24, 1891, 1; on space and class in the city, see John Lear, "Mexico City: Space and Class in the Porfirian Capital, 1884-1910," *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 4 (May 1996): 454-492, especially page 459 for elite residence; on Porfirian mentality, see William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); and William E.

French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). For the elite mindset and the importance of conspicuous consumption, see Beezley, "The Porfirian Smart Set Anticipates Thorstein Veblen in Guadalajara,"

in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994).

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a half to La Profesa. Nevraumont had already arranged an after-hours appointment with Hernández, having visited with him previously to discuss a purchase, so the storeowner thought little of unlocking the door and letting inside the well-dressed Nevraumont. [867](#)

But Hernández quickly suspected a trap. He realized his error when Martínez entered the humid shop and asked to purchase a silver timepiece at the same time as Treffel stepped inside and closed the door, leaving Sousa and Caballero to maintain watch outside.

Hernández told the men that they were not there to buy watches, that they were not “*gente buena*,” drew a revolver from his belt, and tried to shoot Nevraumont. The cartridge in his gun failed to explode, allowing Nevraumont time to wrestle him to the floor and drag him to the other room in the shop, the living quarters in the rear. With the help of Martínez he bound, gagged, and placed the storeowner on a sofa. Worried by the old man’s laboured breathing, Nevraumont propped him up with several pillows for greater comfort. [868](#)

Although only joining the team that very day, Nevraumont now took charge. He told Martínez and Treffel to guard Hernández for few moments while he returned to the showroom. He walked straight to the show window “looking out onto the street and took a diamond bracelet that passersby had seen for days and had stirred their greed and covetousness.” He hid the magnificent piece, all twenty-five diamonds set in gold and surrounding a

“very clear” single diamond of “great dimensions,” then returned to the backroom and called out to Treffel and Martínez to help him in front. Martínez reached for a display of watch chains, but Nevraumont restrained him, pointing out that they were only 867 For broadsheet drawings of the crime and trial, see Ron Tyler, *Posada’s Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1979), 218-220; Roberto and Stanley Appelbaum, eds., *Posada’s Popular Mexican Prints: 273*

Cuts by José Guadalupe Posada (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972), 48-55; and Patrick Frank, *Posada’s Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998). Consult *La Voz de México* on the planning of the crime (Mar. 15, 1891, 3); on waiting in the park (Apr.

2, 1891, 2); and on the disguising and route taken (Apr. 25, 1891, 2). For the previously arranged appointment, see *Two Republics*, Apr. 10, 1891, 4.

868 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 3.

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gold-plated. Martínez returned to the bedroom to guard Hernández. As the two remaining thieves pilfered the showcases and any strong boxes that they could open, Nevraumont went to investigated the strained breathing of Hernández, only to see Martínez wielding his knife,

“*como un picador*,” plunging with his full weight the last of three fatal wounds into the shop owner, whom one newspaper described as “the unfortunate old man [*infeliz anciano*].” No kidding. Nevraumont and Treffel, distraught at the turn of events, asked him why he did it.

Martínez allegedly replied, “*los muertos no hablan* [dead men tell no tales].” They quickly stripped Hernández of his watch and emptied his

wallet, left the body where it lay, and fled the building after a total of fifteen minutes. [869](#)

Moments later they flagged down a coach, drove to a pulquería, had several glasses, and then headed back to Sousa's house to divide the spoils, approximately four to eight thousand pesos in diamonds, pearls, jewelry, and cash. The diamond bracelet and a blue diamond solitaire were the most impressive acquisitions, later appraised at eight hundred and four hundred pesos each. Nevraumont kept these for himself, never telling the others that he had stolen them on his first forage through the showroom. The rest of the jewelry consisted of loose diamonds, "clear, like drops of water," diamond and gold rings, watches, watch chains, pearl necklaces, black pearl, diamond, emerald, gold and platinum earrings, pins, broaches and other assorted pieces. Over the next four weeks of chase, much of this would be melted down, pawned, or sold on the street—a ready market in Mexico City. The value of this robbery placed the five among the criminal elite as they exceeded the common parameters of the criminal code. The code outlined prison sentences for crimes of fifty to 869 *La Voz de México* Apr. 2, 1891, 2; Apr. 3, 1891, 2; and Apr. 23, 1891, 2. On the diamond bracelet, *La Voz de México*, Apr. 24, 1891, 2; and Apr. 25, 1891, 3. On the stabbing, see *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 3; *Two Republics*, Apr. 10, 1891, 4. On Martínez's alleged quote, *La Voz de México*, Apr. 3, 1891, 2.

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one thousand pesos, with criminals who surpassed that amount receiving one and one half years plus one extra month for every one hundred additional pesos. [870](#)

A short time later, at a quarter of eight, the night watchman for La Esmeralda stopped short in front of La Profesa. The main door gaped open, demanding immediate attention from the watchman who duly investigated with his lantern. He found that “the interior of the store was in disorder” and quickly notified the local gendarme number 605 and the employees of La Esmeralda. Within minutes, journalists from the newspaper *La Voz de México* arrived and notified the police station by way of telephone from their shop on nearby Santa Clara Street. Little did the night watchman know that he had just set in motion the investigation of what some have called the first modern crime in Mexico. [871](#)

Large rewards may or may not have helped to capture the thieves, but they definitely suggested the importance that important members of Mexican society attached to this event.

Within days, President Díaz himself was offering two thousand pesos to the person who captured the criminals, and the district governor offered five hundred pesos to the gendarme who apprehended them. Díaz broke with his usual role of non-involvement in police duties and took an active interest in this case; *La Voz de México* noted on March 3 that he “had 870 Experts deemed the final value of the crime to be \$4000 to \$8000 pesos and leaned towards the latter amount as noted in *La Voz de México*, Apr. 26, 1891, 2. A contradictory sum of 100,000 pesos may be found in Patrick Frank, “Art and Life in Broad sheets by Posada,” MSS, University of Colorado, 1996, 176, which is the manuscript for Patrick Frank, *Posada’s Broad sheets*. Perhaps his source, a March 2, 1926 article from the newspaper *Universal Gráfico* may have merely inflated the figure to match the inflationary value of the Mexican peso by 1926. For a description of the appearance, diversity and value of the individual pieces of jewelry, see *La Voz de México*, Mar. 21, 1891, 3; Mar. 22, 1891, 1; Apr. 23, 1891, 2; and Apr. 26, 1891, 2. On the melting down of gold and pawning of the jewelry, see *La Voz de México*, Apr. 23, 1891, 2; Apr. 25, 1891, 2-3; and Apr. 26, 1891, 2. On the ready street market for stolen goods, see stories in newspapers such as *Two Republics*, Jan. 16, 1891, 4; and July 31, 1891, 4. On the criminal code punishment for theft, see Moisés González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida*

social, vol. 4 of *Historia moderna de México*, ed. Daniel Cosío Villegas (Mexico City: Editorial Hermes, 1955-1972), 437.

871 *Two Republics*, Feb. 21, 1891, 4; and *La Voz de México*, Feb. 22, 1891, 2-3; Feb. 24, 1891, 1. On the first modern crime claim, see *El Universal Gráfico*, Mar. 2, 1926, 2, cited in Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets*, 107.

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ceaselessly pushed” district authorities to capture the criminals. [872](#) The robbery of La Profesa was no ordinary case, a fact that newspapers and public opinion soon made clear.

By March 3 police had captured Caballero, Treffel, and Sousa. On March 6 Martínez fell prey to the secret police when an agent lured him into a sombrero shop where authorities awaited him. Nevraumont escaped the police until March 14 when they found him in Tuxpan, Veracruz, cursing the bad weather that had delayed his steamship trip to Havana. [873](#)

The La Profesa robbery and trial offers a remarkable snapshot of Porfirian society in the throes of rapid economic and cultural modernization. Through the broadsheets of the famous popular graphic artist José Guadalupe Posada and the reports of two newspapers—

the American colony’s *Two Republics* and the Catholic *La Voz de México*—the trial comes alive. The effects of the Porfirian modernization project on daily life, the commodification of society, the living conditions and survival strategies of the urban poor, the social discourse of criminality, and the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity in society all surface during this case. For the historian, then, the affair serves up a smorgasbord of future research topics.

La Profesa truly represented one of the rare crimes that threatened the “common knowledge”

canons of belief held be a society, and the intense public interest and participation in the investigation and trial during the ensuing ten weeks suggested that this robbery deeply impressed upon the psyche of Porfirian society.

872 On rewards, see *La Voz de México*, Feb. 25, 1891, 2. On Díaz’s coaxings, see *La Voz de México*, Mar. 3, 1891, 2; and on his usual distance from police affairs, see Laurence Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction in Mexico City, 1876-1911: A Study of Order and Progress in Porfirian Mexico” (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1983), 50.

873 On Martínez’s capture, see *La Voz de México*, Mar. 7, 1891, 2; on Nevraumont’s capture, see *La Voz de México*, Mar. 21, 1891, 1.

The Transgressions

When Nevraumont walked over the threshold of la Profesa, he crossed the class and ethnic boundaries both set by Porfirian society and shaped by positivist and social Darwinian intellectual currents. He and his gang committed a transgressive crime. Hernández had opened his door to him because he fit the social type-cast of a wealthy, respectable person of reason: well-dressed and French, not cotton-clad, Indian, and poor. By betraying this trust, he pierced many of the social Darwinian belief that influenced the thoughts of Mexican ruling elites. [874](#)

Consider how the American journalists of the newspaper *Two Republics* portrayed assorted suspects during the investigation and trial. Women as well as men received labels that marked them as fallen members of society. Commentators described Concha Peña as

“heretofore enjoy[ing] a shady reputation” and Taurina Perez, Treffel’s mistress as “a regular termagant of a woman who fears neither God nor man, and has a stubborn will of her own.”

The first four serious suspects in the case give further testimony to the class and criminality assumptions held by police investigators. Police arrested the first, a poor stable boy named Prisciliano Galván, because “he betrayed considerable emotion when brought before the dead body.” They charged the second, Francisco Hinojosa, with the possession of “erratic habits”

and “a shady reputation.” Hinojosa, along with the third and fourth suspects, had robbed a jewelry store two weeks prior. Notes of desperation marked police efforts, for what else could explain their subsequent arrest of several bull-fighters? Overall, the police stayed true [874](#) For information on positivism see Leopoldo Zea, *Positivism in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974). For a concise account of social Darwinism consult

Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For its place in Porfirian criminology, see Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato, "Tales of Two Women: The Narrative Construal of Porfirian Reality," *The Americas*, 55, no. 3 (January 1999): 391-424. For an elaboration of this paragraph, see Chapter Five.

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to the assumptions of social Darwinian criminology models during their first sweep for the perpetrators. [875](#)

Understandably, the La Profesa robbery shocked those who put faith in this organization of social behaviour. By necessity it was well-planned, soberly executed, and thoroughly brilliant in its daring. Baffled commentators spoke for the public as they wondered just how the thieves had seamlessly carried out this crime during the busiest time of the day, under the bright artificial lights of the streets, "Without the notice of any authorities or passers-by." Moreover, Sousa and Caballero, along with a woman believed to be Concha Peña, watched Hernández and his habits every day for six months. The crime's perpetrators dressed not in the clothes of poverty but of prosperity. For some Mexicans, this sartorial sleight-of-hand hearkened back to the days of Jesús Arriaga—popularly known as Chucho el Roto (Chucho the Dandy)—the first famous urban bandit of the Porfiriato who robbed prominent citizens and establishments, including La Profesa, in the early 1880s while wearing the attire of archbishops or elite women. The La Profesa robbers also targeted a social class superior to their own, and could do so disguised not only by dress but also by ethnicity: Treffel was French, and Nevraumont and Sousa were of French origin. They granted followers of the case a window of opportunity to consider the less-than-desirable consequences of the foreign cultural and social traits that Porfirian rule had unquestionably ushered into Mexico. Most damning to the Mexican

criminological model, these thieves showed no signs of succumbing to the social milieu and wallowing in solitary self-875 *Two Republics*, Feb. 26, 1891, 4; Apr. 10, 1891, 4; and June 19, 1891, 4.

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destruction. Instead they engaged it, adopting its rules of competition, and most disturbing, bonded together in collective action to acquire wealth. [876](#)

Stealing the luxuries of the Porfirian elite marked the La Profesa robbery as a direct personal attack on Mexico's rulers. The Mexican elite illustrated the commodity fetishism typical in modernizing capitalist societies by investing the jewels of La Profesa with their gender, class, and cultural values—in short, their identity. The charity balls of the Jockey Club, the Casino Español, and other socialite functions seemed to exist only for men of the capital city's leisure class to display the latest finery of their women. Reports in elite newspapers explained in great detail each woman's *toilette*, her French fashions, and her jewelry. Silver brocade and strings of pearl cascaded off dresses, while diamonds, emeralds, and gold highlighted creamy-skinned throats, cleavages, fingers ears, and wrists, not to mention the beautifully-coiffed obsidian hair for which they acted as a foil. Diamonds symbolized the Porfirian lady; by robbing La Profesa, Nevraumont and the others metaphorically stole the wives and daughters of society's powerful males. [877](#)

Their attack on La Profesa also threatened the common belief in the progressive function and social reform opportunity provided by urban spaces that the respectable members of Mexican society shared with their counterparts in Europe. Nineteenth-century man closely related the city and the positivist beliefs of order and progress developed by 876 On

commentator bewilderment, see *La Voz de México*, Feb. 22, 1891, 3; on the stakeout of Hernández, see *La Voz de México*, Mar. 6, 1891, 3. On Chucho el Roto, see Fernando Ferrari, *Chucho el Roto* (Mexico City: Secretaria de Educación Pública, Conasupo, 1989); Carlos Isla, *Chucho el Roto* (Mexico City: Jorge Porrua, 1985); and Jonathan Kandell, *La Capital: The Biography of Mexico City* (New York: Random House, 1988), 365. For an overlapping but alternative analysis of this crime, see Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets*, 107-116.

877 On commodity fetishism, see Jeffrey D. Needell, *A Tropical Belle Epoque: Elite Culture and Turn-of-the-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 158; for a specific instance of the Porfirian attention to their elite women's pecuniary decency, see the two-day description of the women at the Jockey Club Ball in *Two Republics*, May 19-20, 1891, 4; and Beezley, "The Porfirian Smart Set Anticipates Thorstein Veblen in Guadalajara"; on general theory of a leisure class, see Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

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Auguste Comte. The Victorian middle classes saw that the growth and quality of their cities depended on technological and material achievements. Never before had the possibilities for controlling the environment appeared so attainable. Yet the new cities that grew so fast glittered with more wealth than any society had ever known also stank of poverty as abject as any society had ever suffered. But the Victorian man believed that the forward march of progress in physical conditions would lead inevitably to the eradication of social evils and criminal behaviour. [878](#)

This philosophy applied in Mexico, but in an altered form. Because of social Darwinian ideas, Mexico's rulers did not believe that the Indian and

those of obvious Indian descent—meaning the majority of the popular classes—could ever be redeemed, and therefore they sought to marginalize these groups in urban areas. They undertook this project of geographic social stratification in full force by the end of the 1880s, enacting financial and zoning regulations to push tenements, brothels, cantinas, gambling establishments outside of a budding urban core constructed in their image of a modern, progressive, capitalist city.

Here they could build an efficient infrastructure with sidewalks, paved streets, transportation networks, and sewage systems. On this infrastructure the wealth of a capitalist economy would construct parks for leisure pursuits, offices for productive purposes, or consumer palaces—great showcases to announce the products of material progress and industrial technology, the commodification of social value. In front of these glittering displays to material culture, members of respectable society could mimic their social equivalents in North America and Western Europe, especially France. The French had invented a peculiar leisure activity involving these exhibits, an activity known as window-shopping but one that 878 David Cannadine and David Reeder, eds., *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History* by J. J. Dyos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 73.

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the French in their inimitably descriptive way called *leche-vitrine*, literally “licking the window.” The supposed existence of this safe, ordered, urban social space allowed criminologist Miguel Macedo to declare that “among the middle and upper classes there exists a firmly rooted sense of personal security that manifests itself in an extraordinary liberty of action.” [879](#)

Therefore, not only did the five members of the robbery steal the elite’s luxuries and transgress class and ethnic assumptions, they also transgressed

upon the urban space of the modernizers. From the first editorial two days after the crime until providing a final analysis on April 28, the journalists and editors of *La Voz de México* affected a constant, shrill sense of outrage against the spatial transgression of gente decente territory. They likened the crime to the sword of Damocles hanging over “the lives, interests, and security of those who live in Mexico.” La Profesa should have received protection not only by its location, but by the street lighting and the “thousands of men, women, and children” returning home after their daily labour. After the crime, many residents of this city could not resist making pilgrimages to the site “in the heart of the city,” and by February 24 a group of “curious onlookers, vagrants, and unemployed contemplated the closed door” of La Profesa. [880](#)

For many of these onlookers who claimed membership in respectable society, it was absolutely astonishing to discover that criminal elements had found a way to prey upon progress, and indeed to carry out a crime upon one of the most prominent symbols of 879 Miguel S. Macedo, *La criminalidad en México: medios de combatirla* (Mexico City: Oficina Tip. de la Secretaria de Fomento, 1897), 4-5. For information on the geographic stratification project, see Lear, “Mexico City: Space and Class”; on moral regulation during the Porfiriato, see French, *Peaceful and Working People*, 63-85ff; for information on Porfirian leisure activities, see González Navarro, *El Porfiriato: La vida social*, 693-790ff.

880 For examples of *La Voz de México* outrage, see Feb. 22, 1891, 3; Feb. 25, 1891, 1-2; Feb. 26, 1891, 1; Apr.

2, 1891, 2; and Apr. 28, 1891, 3. The sword of Damocles refers to the Greek myth in which an ancient courtier of Syracuse, Damocles, sat at a banquet beneath a sword hung by a single hair. On the newspaper account of the Porfirian equivalent, see *La Voz de México*, Feb. 25, 1891, 1. On rush hour, *La Voz de México*, Apr. 2, 1891, 2. Curious onlookers may be found in *La Voz de México*, Feb. 25, 1891, 2; and Feb. 26, 1891, 1.

Porfirian material culture. The slick, transgressive style and French influence on the heist suggested that the elimination of crime might not be an inevitable consequence of forward-marching behaviour. Crime, then, might not result from social or hereditary conditions, a revelation that did not sit well with contemporary social Darwinian and positivist models of societal improvement.

Prior to the La Profesa robbery, many members of the gente decente may have wished for this idealized vision of progress, but they also recognized nagging inconsistencies between their social theories and the social realities of life in the capital; the La Profesa robbery and homicide merely provided a forum in which to express their concern. An example of the already existing queasiness, often caused by the effects of modernization itself, may be found within a stone's throw of Hernández's business. Businessmen along the street complained of the sore eyes and throats caused by the fine dust circulating from the laying of the new street pavement, a project that reached Hernández's store on January 25.

The reticence of many proprietors to sweep their sidewalks only worsened the situation.

Hernández probably sympathized with his colleagues, given his penchant for stepping outside for a cigarette and street-watching. Public opinion questioned the merits of this pavement project, wondering if the blocks would retain shape or stay in place. Moreover, while rain kept the dust from rising it made the pavement impassable for equestrian traffic. It frequently led to careening coaches and sometimes even to death caused by skittish steeds.

Those who could not afford the cost of even a third-class coach apparently took great pleasure in spotting these spills: The American colony newspaper, *Two Republics*, disapprovingly noted how after a rain shower

“the street gamins [urchins] watched with unholy joy the frantic effort of the coach horses to keep themselves from falling down . . . As 335

many as three horses were seen within a distance of one block, all in more or less advanced state of prostration.” [881](#)

Popular traditions and crime continued to undermine the gente decente’s efforts to mould central Mexico City in their image. Police tried to enforce regulations seeking to push popular behaviours outside of this central zone, regulations such as the one prohibiting enchilada makers from cooking in the doorways of shops “or where the spattering grease may soil the clothes of the passers-by.” Hernández’s corner attracted a significant crowd of undesirables, leading Hernández to place a placard in his show window “forbidding idlers to stand on that corner by order of the governor of the Federal District.” The corner, “famous . .

. for dudes and mashers” could now be deemed respectable space for “the ladies having occasion to pass.” Even the habitations of citizens reflected this social *mélange*, where colonial mansions regularly neighboured a tenement, or *casa de vecindad*. In 1890, the social segregation and rationalization of urban space in Mexico City had begun, but was far from complete. [882](#)

More than anything else, the constant crime in the city must have shaken the faith in progress held by Hernández and other members of the gente decente in early 1891. True, Díaz had instituted a number of police reform measures in 1879 to provide a safe and investor-friendly environment. He replaced the hated *Resguardo Diurno* and *Nocturno* with the gendarmes and a mounted police force, concentrating the resources of the eight police districts in the main commercial areas. Foreign commentators noted as early as 1883 that [881](#) On paving, complaints, and street-sweeping, see *Two Republics*, Jan. 25, 1891, 4; Feb. 26, 1891, 4; and Apr.

22, 1891, 4. On the daily habits of Hernández, *La Voz de México*, Feb. 24, 1891, 4; pavement blocks, *Two Republics*, Mar. 3, 1891, 4; sliding horses and equestrian-related deaths may be found in *Two Republics*, May 6, 1891, 4; May 24, 1891, 4; and *La Voz de México*, May 6, 1891. For urchin delights, see *Two Republics*, Apr.

29, 1891, 4.

882 Enchilada threats, *La Voz de México*, June 4, 1891, 4; placard, *La Voz de México*, Jan. 23, 1891, 4; on mixed-housing arrangements, see Lears, “Mexico City: Space and Class,” 459.

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police stood within one hundred yards of each other, and in 1888 William E. Curtis wrote,

“At every street corner there is a patrolman night and day.” And yet by 1891 newspapers reported daily the latest crimes of establishments or persons on Plateros and San Francisco, whether by long-time employees, construction workers, burglars, or pickpockets imposing their version of wealth redistribution upon window-shoppers. [883](#)

Hernández had intimately experienced crime before the final fatal robbery. Only eight days before his murder, thieves stole several rings. This theft duplicated another recent minor heist at the store. Six or seven years previously he had suffered a major robbery.

After the two latest heists he invested in an electric alarm bell system for his display cases that drew on new technology entering the market from New York City. His store appeared to attract famous crimes and criminals, as approximately a decade previously Chucho el Roto ravaged his display

cases between robbing the National Bank, the Frizac business house, and the famous dry goods store *La Sorpresa y Primavera*. Thus on the night of February 20, 1891, the impression of Porfirian progress and policing abilities held by Hernández and his *gente decente* brethren likely mixed anxiety amidst a hopeful view of the future. [884](#)

Attacks upon police ineptitude immediately followed the crime. *Two Republics* generally approved of the police efforts and efficiency, but the editorials of *La Voz de México* alternated between begrudging support and blistering charges of incompetence. The day 883 On the replacement of the *Resguardo Diurno* and *Nocturno* with gendarmes and mounted police, see Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction,” 38-40. On the distance between policemen and their public visibility see both Thomas Unett Brocklehurst, *Mexico Today: A Country with a Great Future, and a Glance at the Prehistoric Remains and Antiquities of the Montezumas*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1883) and William E.

Curtis, *The Capitals of Spanish America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888), both cited in Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction,” 81. The urban crime wave is evident in the *Two Republics*, Jan. 15, 1891, 4; Feb. 27, 1891, 4; Apr. 3, 1891, 4; Apr. 30, 1891, 4; and daily in *La Voz de México*.

884 Previous robbery, *La Voz de México*, Feb. 24, 1891, 4; on alarm systems from New York, see *Two Republics*, July 5, 1891, 4; and for advertisement see *El Tiempo Ilustrado*, Mar. 12, 1892, 10. On Chucho el Roto stealing from Hernández, see *La Voz de México*, Feb. 24, 1891, 1; and on Chucho’s other conquests, see Ferrari, *Chucho el Roto*, 74.

after the crime it noted the “insecurity that increased daily” and, “if the police do not redouble their vigilance quickly,” scandals like La Profesa

would continue to plague the city.

La Voz continued its attacks three days later, charging “the ineffective vigilance of the police” for “the bandits that swarm among us . . . mocking with notorious nerve.” [885](#)

The lethargic Inspector General Luis Carballeda and the ruthless Miguel Cabrera—

Carballeda’s second-in-command and head of the Secret Police formed in 1890—were likely the targets of much of this enmity. Carballeda, like many of the Inspectors General took an active part in the revolt of Tuxtepec in 1876 that placed Díaz in power. Beyond a brief flurry of reform measures coinciding with Díaz’s in 1879, Carballeda filled the Inspector’s chair for seventeen years—1877 to 1880 and 1884 to 1897—with remarkable mediocrity. Cabrera, the *de facto* head of the Secret Police (*Comisiones de Seguridad*), commanded a most unloved institution that many viewed as both too intrusive and a complete waste of money.

A sign of their probable ineffectiveness was that while agents wore civilian attire to preserve their anonymity, uniformed *gendarmes* still saluted them in the street. Not surprisingly, then, Concha Peña charged Cabrera during trial with threatening her and treating her poorly, a charge elaborated upon by Treffel who received significant support in the press for his claim that Cabrera had tortured him for a confession. [886](#)

These were not the men to tackle a new breed of criminal that Mexicans believed to be invading the nation. The La Profesa robbery was only one of a series of urban crimes carried out by organized, professional criminals who comprised a criminal class in society—

or so the newspapers believed. “Police investigations in connection with the Hernández [885](#) *La Voz de México*, Feb. 22, 1891, 3; and *ibid.*, Feb. 25, 1891, 2.

886 On Carballada and Inspectors General, see Rohlfes, "Police and Penal Correction," 51, 57; on the secret police, see *ibid.*, 65-69; charges leveled against Cabrera are found in *La Voz de México*, Apr. 26, 1891, 2; and May 6, 1891, 1.

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murder" uncovered an unrelated union of malefactors, "a regularly-organized band of swindlers" who made scamming inheritances their specialty. Three weeks later, news broke of an "organized gang" of pickpockets in the city, a group that one journalist generously titled "the light-fingered gentry of Mexico." Although speaking facetiously, this journalist in fact came closer to the truth than he might have wanted to admit, as pickpockets had become professional, belonging to a class of young thieves of superior skills and intelligence, the most successful ones rarely drawn from the poorest of the poor. To accentuate the international threat posed by this seemingly new "criminal class," stories ran on the spread of the Mafia in the United States and beyond. Testimony from the La Profesa trial only fueled fears that this organized group of professional lurked just below the surface of respectable society. Treffel freely admitted that they planned their heist based on a series of spectacular jewelry store hold-ups recently executed in Paris. [887](#)

Contemporaries of the crime must have wondered what prompted this sudden rush of criminality, or, more accurately, high-profile attacks on the institutions and persons of respectable citizens in Mexico City. The answer lay in economic and social developments transforming Mexico during the Porfiriato that led to the closing of the rural frontier of banditry and the opening of a new frontier of spectacular urban thievery.

887 *Two Republics*, Mar. 5, 1891, 1891, 4; Mar. 22, 1891, 4; Mar. 28, 1891, 4; and Apr. 1, 1891, 4. For studies on the existence of a criminal class, see Cynthia Story Bisson, “Crime and the Transition to Modernity in Nineteenth-Century France: The Morbihan, 1825-1925, A Case Study” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1989); Jennifer Davis, “The London Garrotting Panic of 1862: A Moral Panic and the Creation of a Criminal Class in mid-Victorian England” in *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500*, eds. V. A. C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman, and Geoffrey Parker (London: Europa Publications, 1980); Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900* (London: Longman Group, UK, 1987); George Rudé, *Criminal and Victim: Crime and Society in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), especially page 73; and Howard Zehr, *Crime and the Development of Modern Society: Patterns of Criminality in Nineteenth-Century Germany and France* (Totowa, New Jersey, Rowman and Littlefield, 1976).

For a fascinating account of the Victorian pickpocket, see Michael Crichton, *The Great Train Robbery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 29-32. For the Parisian crime, see *El Universal Gráfico*, Mar. 4, 1926, 13.

The disorder and limited extension of the state in the aftermath of independence in 1821 permitted an environment of countryside lawlessness that marked an age of rural banditry. Domestic factionalism between Liberals and Conservatives caused nearly a half-century of internecine warfare among Mexicans marked by military interventions—and wars with—foreign powers such as the citizens of the United States in 1836 over Texas, the country itself in 1846, and France in several engagements. The last of these engagements began in 1862 when the Emperor Napoleon III imposed his nephew, Austrian Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian upon the throne of Mexico, and ended with Maximilian’s execution in 1867 in front

of a firing squad of Liberals under the leadership of Benito Juárez. Serious political disputes ended in 1867, but the economic situation remained grave. Unworked mines had flooded, foreign and domestic capital had fled the unstable economy, federal coffers were empty, and the transportation infrastructure consisted of little more than bandit-plagued carriage and mule trails. Bandits faced few threats of state control in this world, and their brazen exploits expressed this confidence. Starting in 1876 with the rise to power of Porfirio Díaz in the Plan of Tuxtepec, the rural bandit slowly lost his undisputed reign.

Railroads struck the greatest blow to bandit freedom. Díaz instituted an aggressive track-laying program with the help of foreign technology and capital. Less than 600

kilometres of railroad tracks existed in Mexico prior to Díaz; by 1910, nearly 19,000

kilometres criss-crossed the nation. Railroad engines transported not only consumer and industrial goods to markets, but also permitted quicker responses of security forces to suppress rural banditry and the mythology surrounding it. With the lone example of Santanón in 1906, no rural bandit after the capture of Ignacio Para in 1892 fired the Mexican 340

imagination during the remainder of the Porfiriato. [888](#) “Gone were the great bandit gangs of the past”; the social and political streambeds that had spawned them now lay dry, for

“development had shunted them aside.” [889](#)

The closing of the rural frontier coincided with the opening of an urban frontier of celebrated crime. On the material level, the expanding areas of the Porfiriato offered far greater opportunities, given the inclination, for

thieves to join together in pursuit of larger windfalls. New branches of criminal opportunities also developed in the urban setting, namely embezzling and counterfeiting. Thieves could not help but be attracted and tempted by the accumulation in such confined areas like the jewelry, silversmithing, and shopping drags of Plateros and San Francisco in Mexico City. [890](#)

These, then, were some of the social and cultural issues swirling about the preparation for the trial. The La Profesa perpetrators had committed transgressions of class, ethnicity, and urban spatial boundaries, not to mention metaphorically stealing the women of the elite.

The fallibility of social Darwinian and positivist models of society was also at issue in the public discourse that struggled over the apparent connection between the commodification, modernization, and transformation of crime in Mexican society. Impotency among the law 888 For information on the preceding two paragraphs, see Friedrich Katz, "Mexico: Restored Republic and Porfiriato, 1867-1910" in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 5, ed. Leslie Bethel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3-78; Colin MacLachlan and William H. Beezley, *El Gran Pueblo: A History of Greater Mexico* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1994), 1-130; on railroads and foreign investments, see John H. Coatsworth, *Growth Against Development: The Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981); Sandra Kuntz Ficker, *Empresa extranjera y mercado interno: el Ferrocarril Central Mexicano, 1880-1907* (Mexico: Colegio de México, 1995); and William Schell, *Integral Outsiders: The American Colony in Mexico City, 1876-1911* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001). On railroads and banditry, see Paul Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development*, revised and enlarged edition (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1992).

889 Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress*, 88. On social banditry more generally, consult Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965).

890 On specifically urban crimes, see Rudé, *Criminals and Victim*, 80. Sousa had an earlier conviction for forgery, *La Voz de México*, Apr. 28, 1891, 2.

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enforcement authorities in the face of an apparent urban crime wave provided an easy target and lightning rod for public criticism of the Porfirian regime.

The Trial

On April 15, *Two Republics* presaged the importance and popularity of the upcoming trial set to start five days later. Judge Lic. Salvador Medina y Ormacchea—the brother of the judges Antonio and Carlos who ten years earlier had published one of the first proposals for Mexico’s federal penitentiary—had already heard the charges from chief prosecutor Victoriano Pimentel, former editor of the major newspaper *El Universal* in 1888, that would condemn all five accused to death if found guilty. He ordered that admission to the trial be restricted to special invitation. Chairs would be placed between the benches in all twenty rows of the large hall in the Palace of Justice, thus expanding the seating capacity from four hundred to six hundred. Furthermore, he decreed that police place a strong guard in the salon and that “a company of soldiers will occupy the court to keep order.” On trial day, neither the seating arrangements nor the security detail proved sufficient. [891](#)

At nine o’clock in the morning of April 20, 1891, thirty-five days after the police finally caught Nevraumont, the crowd on Cordobanes Street outside the courts presented quite the sight to onlookers and headaches for the police. *La Voz* likened the “multitude of people from all social classes” to an invasion. The street was so crowded by people

“struggling to get into the court room” that General Carballeda sent for a troop of mounted police “to clear the mob away.” But as the police cleared Cordobanes Street, the throng flowed into parallel and perpendicular streets. When officials sought to disperse these areas [891](#) On the judges Medina y Ormacchea, see Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction,” 217; on the trial preparation, see *Two Republics*, Apr. 15, 1891, 4.

“the mob swayed back into Cordobanes again.” Onlookers would not be denied their day in court. Eventually, Carballeda called in more mounted police to control the crowds on all three converging streets, especially the front of the Justice Palace where “every man and woman was evidently trying his and her best to reach.” [892](#)

Given the state of pandemonium inside the hall, those outside would have achieved negligible results even if they had gained admittance. Police and soldiers maintained a reasonable semblance of order, allowing the galleries to fill “till not another man or woman could find room.” The description of the crowd revealed both a cross-section of society and telling examples of the journalist’s view of social order. He noted that “men of all classes and grades” made up much of the crowd, including lawyers, merchants, traders, shopkeepers, politicians, military officers, newspaper reporters, “and many nondescripts.” Many of the

“gentler sex” rubbed shoulders with the men, including a healthy contingent of “ladies well-known in the best of Mexico’s fashionable society.” These women enjoyed the company of numerous members of Mexico’s power structure, most notably Julio Limantour, brother of Mexico’s Finance Minister José Yves Limantour and one of the great investors and land speculators of the capital who also sat on the executive board of several major companies. [893](#)

Reporters from all the major newspapers pressed into the galleries. Since the trial began, the newspapers, whether Spanish, French, or English language, Catholic or Liberal, elite or popular, all fanned—and were fanned by—the insatiable fascination of their reading public for information on this gruesome, shocking, yet highly titillating crime. Twenty-one reporters from

eleven major newspapers attended the trial itself, including such notables as 892 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 21, 1891, 3; *Two Republics*, Apr. 21, 1891, 4.

893 *Two Republics*, Apr. 21, 1891, 4; on Limantour's presence and that of other important guests, see *La Voz de México*, Apr. 16, 1891, 2; and Apr. 24, 1891, 2. Lear, "Mexico City: Space and Class," 464, provides a short description of Limantour's role among Mexico City's power elite.

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Carlos Roumagnac who represented *El Tiempo* and would later become one of the Porfiriato's greatest criminologists. Whether or not José Guadalupe Posada, the famous popular graphic artist of the Porfiriato, attended the trial is uncertain, yet he produced no less than ten broadsheets on the La Profesa affair, including two on the trial itself. [894](#)

Ironically, in the midst of this press of flesh seeking to catch a glimpse of these now-famous robbers, the onlookers needed only to pay attention to their own watches and purses to observe equally skilled thieves in action. Pickpockets knew a prize venue when they saw one, and they attended in force. Secret police agents played cat and mouse with the "light-fingered gentry," nabbing one man in the act. Further examination of the suspect revealed seven watches on his person. Numerous other catches rewarded officers with two or three watches per arrest. Entertainment and excitement—a carnivalesque atmosphere—emanated from throughout the hall and the outside streets. In a wonderful bit of understatement, the *Two Republics* journalist commented that "today and every day until the conclusion of the trial, there will be an absorbing interest felt in the proceedings of the case." [895](#)

La Voz de México spoke the truth when it promised to pass along the robbers’

personal testimonies to its readers because they are “the most interesting part of this *cause célèbre*.” ⁸⁹⁶ Besides the testimonies of Nevraumont, Martínez, Caballero, Treffel, and Sousa, readers pored over the stories of Sousa’s mistress, Concha Peña, of two part-time fences—Vicente Reyero and Clemente Corona—as well as numerous forensic experts, the owners of next-door La Esmeralda, the coach driver, jewelry agents, and numerous others.

894 For a list of the newspapers present see *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 2, which includes all the major dailies and representatives from the American, Spanish, and French communities. A sampling of Posada’s work on this trial exists in Tyler, *Posada*, 218-220; and Berdecio and Appelbaum, *Posada’s Popular Mexican Prints*, 48-55.

895 *Two Republics*, Apr. 21, 1891, 4; Apr. 22, 1891, 4.

896 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 22, 1891, 2.

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The details of these testimonies not only cut through generalizations and myths about criminality, modernization, and social transformation, but also describe—often in wrenching details—the diverse paths that lead people to crime.

From the beginning of their declarations, the five accused quickly dispelled the idea that they represented a unified, long term, professional gang. Carlos Sousa claimed Caballero was the “soul of the affair,” and Caballero blamed “*el francés*,” meaning Treffel. Martínez first fingered Nevraumont

as the “*alma principal*” but then changed to state that Caballero was his boss and Nevraumont took command during the actual crime, an argument that the prosecution finally adopted. [897](#)

Previous prison time brought these men together. Every one of them spent time in the Mexico City jail of Belén, previously known as the National Prison before becoming the Municipal Prison in 1886. The prison, an ex-convent, was the antithesis of restrictive penitentiary architecture. Every day the prisoners packed the main patio. They talked, played cards, or sunned themselves after bathing in the patio’s fountain. Little had changed from 1879 when Francisco G. Cosmes described the prison: “Gathered together in a patio, without doing absolutely anything . . . the prisoners improve themselves in all secrets of crime through a system of mutual education that would cause the envy of the Lancastrian Company.” [898](#) Here, in Belén, Caballero envisioned and planned the robbery. [899](#) He met Sousa there in 1887. At a later date they both met Treffel. Treffel, having served three sentences at Belén, forged a lifetime bond with Sousa when he saved Sousa’s life: when Sousa lay ill in the prison infirmary and had to take medicine, Treffel found out that someone had switched the labels on his two bottles. As Sousa concluded, “*Era una amistad de* [897](#) *La Voz de México*, Mar. 6, 1891, 3; Mar. 15, 1891, 3; and Apr. 28, 1891, 3.

[898](#) Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction,” 204-205.

[899](#) *La Voz de México*, Apr. 28, 1891, 2.

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cárcel.” He also edited a newspaper in prison entitled *La Verdad* and signed his name “Fray Patricio” because Caballero called him “padre.” [900](#) Martínez knew all of his accomplices except Nevraumont from prison although he was never an intimate friend with any of them during his seven

year sentence for robbing a store with his brother. He attained the position of President in Belén, although Sousa intimated that he earned the title from his ability to handle a weapon, not from democratic elections. [901](#) At least in the case of La Profesa, prison did breed crime.

Techniques to capture criminals also advanced with the larger Porfirian modernization project, often piggybacking technology primarily designed to expand a growing consumer market. Consider the use of photography. After police captured Caballero, he claimed Martínez—still at large—as one of his accomplices. To verify this, Carballeda looked up prison photographs of Martínez in Belén’s Special Registration Book.

He then showed the pictures to Treffel, Sousa, and possibly Reyro and Corona who, visibly surprised, declared unanimously “*Es Jesús Martínez.*” [902](#)

The use of the fledgling telephone network in Mexico City had helped inform the police station of the crime, but perhaps the story of Nevraumont’s flight and capture reveals the most instructive example of modernization on daily life. After the crime, Nevraumont set a path for Havana, Cuba. Dressed as dapperly as ever, he traveled by train to Puebla, then Zacapoxtla, and finally Veracruz, selling jewels along the way. There, he walked up the coastline to Papantla then to Tuxpan, where eight days later he planned to set sail by 900 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 24, 1891, 2.

901 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 2; Apr. 26, 1891, 2.

902 *La Voz de México*, Mar. 7, 1891, 2. Photographing criminals in 1891 contradicts Laurence Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction,” 92, who argues that police first bought a camera in 1897 and even then barely used the new technology. In *Two Republics*, Sept. 6, 1891, the city council voted \$124 pesos to pay for the photos of 1508 criminals who had stood before the courts.

steamship to Havana. He did not raise suspicion in the towns he walked through, “for his suit, manners, and general comportment did not betray that of an assassin.” Townspeople thought he was merely the son of a good family (*buena familia*) or else traveling salesman hawking merchandise for one of the merchant houses of the capital. [903](#)

His chances for escape seemed likely, having quickly escaped Mexico City and now residing in a fairly remote town, but the equally rapid distribution of mass-circulation newspapers foiled his escape. The March 6 edition of *El Universal* reached Tuxpan on March 11, and one local resident identified Nevraumont as the man in the portrait on the cover page. Local police telegraphed Mexico City for verification as reports had placed Nevraumont as far north as Ciudad Juárez. Secret Police Inspector Miguel Cabrera wired back that he would arrive soon. Nevraumont planned to sail on the day of Cabrera’s arrival, but high winds prevented the departure of his boat, the USS *Orizaba*. Police tracked him down to the clothing store of Sres. Díaz y Lorenzo where he was leaning against the shop window and complaining about the bad weather. Two days later he would be sent under guard by steamer to Veracruz, and from there by train into Buenavista station in Mexico City where he arrived on March 23. Along the way, crowds and journalists sought to catch a glimpse of him, and one reporter from the French newspaper *Le Trait d’Union* tried to board the ship heading to Veracruz in search of an interview before police stopped him.

Nevraumont’s flight and apprehension incorporated many of the aspects of modernization transforming Mexico: the train, steamship, telegraph, mass-circulation newspapers, 903 *La Voz de México*, Mar. 19, 1891, 2; Apr. 25, 1891, 3.

photography, commercial zones, and the anonymity provided by a fluid labour force that Nevraumont benefited from in his presumed role of a traveling salesman. [904](#)

The fluidity of labour also revealed itself in the personal testimonies of the accused.

Their diverse job and educational backgrounds muddled the clear belief by many in society that there existed professional criminals who dedicated their lives to crime. Their birthplaces reflected the cosmopolitanism of Mexico City and its role as a destination to make a fortune: Caballero was born in Michoacán, Sousa in Veracruz, Treffel in Lorraine, France, and Nevraumont grew up in San Luis Potosí, while the birthplace of Martínez remained unclear.

Trial records told little of Martínez's history beyond his criminality, a significant omission that may have tied into his being the most Indian of the group and thus fitting the description of the positivist and social Darwinian criminal. With is elementary school education, Caballero worked for a number of years in two jobs, the latter of which he lost when a fellow night watchman spread rumours about him to their boss. [905](#)

After he left prison in 1887, Treffel sought work with the 20 pesos he received from Belén, presumably for his work during the final *libertad preparatoria* phase of his sentence, and the 300 francs that his dead mother had left him. [906](#) He traveled about the area in search of work, before returning to Mexico City with hopes of gaining employment with the Barcelonettes. The term Barcelonettes applied to Frenchmen from a region in southeastern France on the Italian border who began to arrive in Mexico during the first half of the nineteenth century and dominated the clothing

retail business in the Republic as well as other 904 *La Voz de México*, Mar. 19, 1891, 1; Mar. 21, 1891, 1; Mar. 21, 1891, 3; Mar. 22, 1891, 3; and Apr. 25, 1891, 3.

905 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 24, 1891, 1.

906 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 2.

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large businesses as varied as dynamite making, beer brewing, and cigarette manufacturing. [907](#)

According to Treffel, a number of them also dabbled in smuggling operations. In a demonstration of the famed regionalism of the Barcelonettes, when Treffel told them that he came from Lorraine they replied “Ah! Then there is no work.” Trained as a plasterer he could not find employment elsewhere. He unsuccessfully tried to obtain a construction job at La Esmeralda. Ironically, he would later bury his jewels at the construction site of the new La Esmeralda building. His last effort at legal employment failed as the customs house as a *cargador* before accepting out of sheer desperation Sousa’s offer to participate in the robbery. [908](#)

More than any of the accused, Sousa and Nevraumont proved that the line between honest labourer and criminal were a fine one indeed, one that Mexicans of all classes crossed more often than the gente decente would like to believe. Rather than opposing the legal system, the two of them actually participated in it before their crime; at different times both had found employment as court secretaries (*secretarios de juzgado*) in Veracruz. [909](#) Sousa achieved his position through ties made “with several well-informed people in the state government” during his schooling. Later

he moved to Tamaulipas as a watchman but lost his job when a powerful smuggler had him transferred to Veracruz for reporting him. Back in Veracruz he amassed 3000 pesos as a consignment dealer, and then traveled to Mexico City to make his fortune. A string of fish, *pulque*, and *aguas frescas* businesses failed, “in every one he lost money and brought misery to him.” [910](#) As for Nevraumont, he attended college with his future fence in Mexico City, Vicente Reyero, and later received his job as court 907 See Chapter Three for more information on the Barcelonnettes.

908 *La Voz de México*, Mar. 6, 1891, 2; Apr. 25, 1891, 2.

909 For Sousa, see *La Voz de México*, Apr. 24, 1891, 2; for Nevraumont, see *La Voz de México*, Apr. 28, 1891, 3.

910 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 24, 1891, 2.

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secretary in Veracruz. He fell prey to the fickleness of the city *jefe político* who, in an

“arbitrary decision” impressed him into the army. Nevraumont served briefly in the 23rd Battalion before being discharged due to his bouts of epilepsy. On February 18, two days before the crime, he arrived in Mexico City. [911](#)

Nevraumont’s experience touches on the importance of the military during the Porfiriato, a topic to which historians have only begun to warm. [912](#) Responding to the prosecution’s final argument to the jury, Nevraumont’s lawyer asked the jury to not only consider his client’s respected position of court secretary in Veracruz, but to remember not only his service but also the sacrifice of his father in the military. Colonel D. Fernando Nevraumont

died in Veracruz of yellow fever while defending ex-president Juárez, implying that the senior Nevraumont fought against Díaz in the failed Plan de Noria in 1871. [913](#)

Although the testimony never states it, Sousa probably served in the military as well, or else knew a great deal about its organization. After the robbery he fled to the military thermal baths at Santa Clara, just outside of San Cristóbal Ecatepec in the state of Mexico and a mere 600 metres from the site where the Spanish had executed the great Independence hero José Maria Morelos on December 22, 1815. He told the colonel in charge, Genaro Soberanis, that Minister of War General Hinojosa had recommended him to the baths as he was a rheumatic war veteran. After the baths cured him, he said he would be sent to Sonora to fight in the 911 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 3; *La Voz de México*, Apr. 26, 1891, 3.

912 For works tackling this subject of a more top-down approach, see Daniel Gutiérrez Santos, *Historia Militar de México, 1876-1914* (Mexico City: Ediciones Ateneo, 1955); and David Coffey, “Brothers of the Sword: Military Tradition in Porfirian Mexico” (A paper presented at Texas Christian University, Fall, 1996). For the role of the military in forging a modern citizenry and a national identity, see Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 292-302.

913 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 28, 1891, 3. For information on the Plan de Noria, see Laurens Ballard Perry, *Juárez and Díaz: Machine Politics in Mexico* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1978).

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campaign against the Yaqui Indians. The police eventually captured him during his stay at the baths. [914](#)

The testimony of Concepción (Concha) Peña weaves the survival strategies of a lower-middle class woman with the fabric of popular traditions blended with new cultural forms in urban Mexico. Peña did not fit the bipolar “prostitutes or guardian angels” gente decente stereotype of the Mexican woman. [915](#) Contradicting the prosecutions insinuations of his “*relaciones ilícitas*,” Sousa stated that although they lived together for six months, she was not dependent upon him and, if anything, the opposite was true. They had met when a friend of Sousa’s invited him to her home to sing some songs from Veracruz. [916](#) To move to Mexico City, she had sold a plot of land in the Morelos *colonia* and with that money she traveled to the capital, bought jewelry and other items from pawnshops, and then sold them to other pawnshops for a higher price. She noted that she would sometimes entrust Sousa with this work, “and with the earnings from this business I support myself.” She knew that Sousa lacked employment, but supported him in court by pointing out that he was looking for work and at various times he showed her letters of recommendation (*cartas de recomendación*). [917](#)

Upon the court’s request she described her home. She and Sousa lived in a tenement, a *casa de vecindad*, within two blocks of where the family of Hernández lived. Four small rooms comprised the apartment, including a small entrance room with no balcony onto the 914 *La Voz de México*, March 4, 1891, 2.

915 For further information on the discourse of femininity and gender during the Porfiriato, see Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); William E. French, “Prostitutes and Guardian Angels: Women, Work, and the Family in Porfirian Mexico,”

Hispanic American Historical Review 72, no. 4 (November 1992): 529-553; and Carmen Ramos Escandón,

“Señoritas Porfirianas: Mujer y ideología en el México progresista, 1880-1910,” in *Presencia y transparencia: La mujer en la historia de México*, ed. Carmen Ramos Escandón (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1987).

916 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 24, 1891, 2.

917 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 26, 1891, 2.

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street, a dining room and kitchen, main living room and a bedroom. The bedroom connected to the main room by means of a partition consisting of a frame with India paper on one side (thin, tough, opaque printing paper) and lace curtains on the other. Through tears in the paper she had observed the robbers divide up the spoils on the night of the robbery and homicide. [918](#)

By way of elaborating upon how she met Nevraumont for the first time on April 20, Peña served up a slice of daily customs and diversions for the urban working class.

Responding to the prosecutor Pimentel's question of whether she expected Nevraumont at lunch that day, she responded negatively. Sousa annoyed her because he had only mentioned that since it was Friday, he wanted her to prepare a little bit of fish "*al estilo de Veracruz*."

Pimental, in an effort to play upon socio-economic divisions, noted that she had earlier mentioned that Nevraumont had a decent aspect and fine clothing, and then asked her

"weren't you mortified that a person like that would eat in your company?" Peña deftly countered this affront to her honour, replying that her cooking may not be "sumptuous

[*opipara*]" but neither was it humble. He then moved on to her role in the disguising of Nevraumont and Sousa, but she claimed not to have helped except to prepare the glue that Sousa had asked for the beards. After arranging his beard, Nevraumont apparently said

“watch where the jewel falls [*mire ud. se le cae la piocha*]” mimicking a circus trick.

Puzzled, she asked Sousa what he meant, receiving a smile and the reply “perhaps we’re in Carnival, eh? [*acaso no estamos en Carnaval?*]” Peña, clinging to her innocence, claimed that she thought he was talking about “some latest entertainment [*algún diversion de la época*]” in town. [919](#)

918 *Ibid.*

919 *Ibid.*

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Peña’s efforts to minimize her role emphasized a general effort for each of the accused to save themselves by utilizing assumptions of gender, class, and ethnicity. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary provided by Nevraumont and others, Peña sought to avoid guilt by wrapping herself in the mantle of the “guardian angel,” of the innocent and pure woman merely following her man. Earlier testimony had identified her as the woman helping to stake out the store and to disguise Nevraumont and Sousa, yet she clung to the story that she knew of the crime only after the five men returned with the jewels. [920](#) At that point, she claims to have kicked Sousa out of the apartment, saying that she wanted no part in this shameful act. Her specious claims received little sympathy from *La Voz*, which followed her comment with the disclaimer “That, at least, is what Concha has declared.” [921](#)

The prosecution continually sought to link sexual immorality with criminality, not only with Peña's relationship to Sousa, but also with that between Treffel and his mistress, Taurina Pérez. Treffel's testimony stands as one of the few examples during the trial of honour loyalty, and defiance of the court. Asked why he did not bring his jewels to his house but instead buried them at the La Esmeralda construction site, Treffel answered that he did not wish to compromise his Pérez. He did not wish to involve her because he loved her for her "noble heart" and because he "owe[d] her many favours and respect[ed] her." Pimentel, sensing a bit of juicy revelation for the court and his audience, pressed Treffel on what type of favours he owed her. Treffel cut short this line of questioning with a curt response: "No señor; I come here for the crime of robbery, and as those favours have absolutely no connection to this crime, I believe your whole point is a useless one." [922](#)

920 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 3.

921 *La Voz de México*, Mar. 6, 1891, 3.

922 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 2.

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Treffel's refusal to cower before the courts may have stemmed from his image as a well-dressed and well-mannered Frenchman and reveals yet again the importance of class and ethnicity in the trial. Before the trial began, two pulque-dealer associates of Caballero named Gerardo and Timoteo Wesche were released after protesting their innocence, a claim *La Voz* unquestionably accepted, "knowing, as we know, that Wesches belong to an honourable family in Puebla." Their father helped to arrange loans

with the Germans and was “so respected that despite German citizenship [he was] named citizen of the State of Puebla.” [923](#)

Defense lawyers for Treffel and Martínez attempted to gain freedom for their clients using polar opposite strategies reflecting class and racial criteria. Treffel’s lawyer Joaquín Carbajal, referring to a letter from the French legation voting for the good conduct of Treffel, asked the psychologist Dr. Maldonado y Móron if his client, given his known mental and physical constitution, could have suffered a “*decomposición*” in his moral faculties and sense when he committed the crime. [924](#) Martínez did not have the resources of the French legation and the social status to suggest that his transgression amounted to a mere temporary lapse.

Instead his lawyer, Maximiliano Baz, sought protection in social Darwinian theories and the new science of phrenology, asking Dr. Fernando Ortigoso to examine the head of Martínez to clarify whether his client was micro- or macrocephalic and if his cerebral organs were underdeveloped. [925](#)

Martínez was obviously no fool, and he readily recognized his position as the most Indian left him susceptible to the role of scapegoat. On April 27, the penultimate day of the 923 *La Voz de México*, Mar. 6, 1891, 3.

924 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 26, 1891, 3.

925 *La Voz de México*, Apr. 28, 1891, 2; for a contemporary perspective on phrenology and its intellectual currency, see Francisco Martínez Baca and Manuel Vergara, *Estudios de antropología criminal* (Puebla: Imprenta Lit. y Encuadernación de Benjamin Lara, 1892).

trial during which Martínez and Nevraumont verbally sparred over who committed the actual murder, Martínez broke from the dialogue and with “*viveza y energia*” addressed the court:

“It seems to me that I am accused of murdering Mr. Hernández because I am Indian and ugly

. . .” He fought a losing battle, however, and when the prosecution decided to charge him solely for the murder of Don Tomás Hernández, “an applause was heard; the judge banged his gavel prohibiting any such demonstration.”

[926](#) The Profesa robbery was the perfect modernizing crime with the one flaw: the violent murder of Tomás Hernández. The inevitability of attributing this excess to the lone phenotypically Indian defendant to preserve the narrative of cultural progress appeared preordained.

The tension of the trial and the stakes involved clearly took their toll on the accused, although in telling instances the reports of the middle-class *Two Republics* and *La Voz de México* (a more explicitly sensationalistic tabloid) sharply contrasted with the broadsheets produced by José Guadalupe Posada and targeted for a popular audience. Articles by *Two Republics* were replete with accounts of the beaten, docile, and resigned demeanor of the prisoners, while *La Voz* occasionally noted instances of confidence like those of Nevraumont’s “elegantly dressed and smiling” fence, Vicente Reyero. [927](#) On March 7, a journalist from the *Two Republics* declared that all of the prisoners appeared “demoralized.

There is none of the bravado, so common among criminals, displayed by them.”

“Nervousness and fear” gripped Treffel. Martínez had threatened suicide. Upon his capture, Nevraumont reportedly revealed a “sullen demeanor” having “given up all hope of escaping his doom.” Entering the courtroom, Nevraumont appeared agitated, mopping his beaded [926](#) *La Voz de México*, Apr. 28, 1891, 2.

[927](#) *La Voz de México*, Apr. 26, 1891, 2.

brow with a handkerchief. His distressed behaviour elicited soothing comments from the judge telling him to calm himself. [928](#)

On April 29 the judge read the verdict of the jury which led to the final collapse of Martínez. Salvador Medina y Ormaecchea sentenced Martínez to death for murder, the execution to take place at Belén, while the others received punishments to be served at the dreaded presidio at San Juan Ulua in Veracruz. [929](#) This ruling in and of itself illustrates the threat that Mexican society considered the crime. Before 1900, the Federal District judges rarely sentenced the accused to death, limiting the eligible to traitors in foreign wars, bandits, patricide, and “murderers who acted with perfidy, *premeditation or a desire for profit*” (my emphasis). [930](#) Moreover, the Federal District did not transport criminals to Ulua because of the high daily expense. For example, in 1885 the presidio held only seven civilian prisoners.

This number continued to decline. [931](#) Nevraumont, after appealing an initial verdict of death, received a commuted sentence of 19 years and \$1000 pesos in fines; Caballero, Sousa, and Treffel accepted 16 years of hard labour and similar fine. Peña would spend five years at Belén. All of the five main participants would die in prison except Treffel who eventually became a successful businessman in Puebla. [932](#) *Two Republics* reported that immediately [928](#) *La Voz de México*, Apr. 25, 1891, 2.

[929](#) *Two Republics*, Apr. 29, 1891, 4.

[930](#) Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction,” 312.

[931](#) On Ulúa, see Rohlfes, “Police and Penal Correction,” 224-226. Of crucial importance is the issue of when the practice of transportation

resumed. Rohlfes says this occurred in 1892 (pages 225-226), but the La Profesa members started their sentence in mid-1891. I believe this is strong evidence to support the claim that the La Profesa robbery resulted in the reinstitution of transport to Ulúa.

932 I am indebted to Patrick Frank for the information of Treffel's later prosperity and the confirmation that the other four died. The source is *Universal Gráfico*, Mar. 4, 1926. Nevertheless, I question the accuracy of this account due to a flurry of front-page newspaper reports on Treffel after he exits prison in 1901. He quickly becomes tangled up in a scheme in which he claims to have discovered the Philosopher's Stone and declares that he has produced a large quantity of gold with his knowledge. He is charged, tried, and sentenced for the crime of fraud and sent back to San Juan de Ulua for another term. The final newspaper report in the series sympathizes with him, declaring him "a martyr of science, unappreciated and misunderstood, like the national liquor [tequila? Or pulque?]." Apparently the missing jewels from the Profesa robbery have yet to be found and 356

after hearing his sentence Martínez "completely lost his reason" and "thinks he is a green parrot." Supposedly he spent the remainder of the hearing repeating words and phrases spoken by others. [933](#)

Posada's broadsheet graphics diametrically opposed the characterizations of the *Two Republics* which had most maligned Martínez. His focus on Martínez as both the killer and the most Indian sought to—and likely succeeded in—appealing to his popular audience comprised mostly of lower- and lower-middle class mestizos and those of Indian descent.

Occasionally at odds with the accompanying text written by the publisher-owner Antonio Vegas Arroyo, Posada invariably portrayed Martínez as confident and defiant after the trial, a real *macho*. Confined in Belén, Martínez briefly escaped from the prison by climbing over the walls of the ex-convent; not the typical actions of a broken man. Furthermore, he

declared his hatred for, and resolve to kill, his arresting police officer Miguel Cabrera. He scratched into his prison cell wall, “Soon they are going to kill me, but I don’t care. I will kill Cabrera.” Not long after, guards discovered a knife blade in his room. [934](#) On the day of his execution, Martínez would take one last swipe at Cabrera. Escorted into the patio for his execution, he asked permission to speak with Cabrera. They were speaking in a low voice when suddenly Martínez pulled out another knife and wounded Cabrera in the arm.

Pandemonium broke out in the courtyard (*una confusión indescriptible*) but eventually the guards recaptured Martínez. He cried out for one last time that Nevraumont was the assassin, Treffel knows where they are. See *El Imparcial*, Apr. 17, 1901, 1; Apr. 17, 1901, 2; Apr. 18, 1901, 1; Apr. 22, 1901, 1.

933 *Two Republics*, Apr. 30, 1891, 4.

934 See Frank, *Posada’s Broadsheets*, 115, for the above information on the defiance, escape, resolution, and knife of Martínez.

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not him. Defiant to the end, he ordered the riflemen to aim and fire. They needed three finishing shots (*tiros de gracia*) to end his life. [935](#)

Leading up to this final dramatic scene, Martínez spent his last living day on earth in the *capilla*, or chapel, praying in solitude and confounding authorities of the spiritual realm.

With the separation of Church and State declared by the reform laws of the mid-1850s the *capilla* was no longer adorned with religious icons, but most prisoners used it for prayer anyways. What made Martínez’s case unusual

was that he was not praying to God and the Virgin Mary for salvation but rather to Jesus: Martínez was a Protestant. [936](#) The battle over souls in Porfirian Mexico was an important one as illustrated by the editorial duels between Liberal and Catholic newspapers over the religious beliefs of dying patriotic generals. [937](#) For a prisoner to confess would signal his final submission to God and State. Martínez devotedly read Protestant religious tracts (*folletos protestantes*) and at first rebuffed the efforts of *La Sociedad Católica* representative Lic. Don Jesús Álvarez Leal to confess to a priest. Instead he wanted to read a real Bible and talk to an evangelical minister. The press announced that he eventually broke down and agreed to see two priests, accepted the Sacrament of Penitence and received communion while three women from his family looked on. [938](#)

The Conclusion

935 *La Voz de México*, January 8, 1892, 2. In this account of the execution, Martínez wounds Cabrera in the arm, but Patrick Frank states that the police detective's neck received the injury in Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets*, 115. On the regular necessity of finishing shots, see Rohlfes, "Police and Penal Correction," 315, where he notes their regular use.

936 For more on protestants in Porfirian Mexico, consult Deborah J. Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); and Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Los disidentes: Sociedades protestantes y revolución en México, 1872-1911* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989).

937 See Mathew D. Esposito, "Memorializing Modern Mexico: State Funerals of the Porfirian Era, 1876-1911"

(Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1997).

938 *La Voz de México*, Jan. 8, 1892, 2.

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The La Profesa robbery was arguably the first modern robbery in Mexico. In its aftermath the government significantly strengthened and reorganized the secret police force while jewelry store owners discussed the early closing of their shops to avoid the fate of Hernández. [939](#) Not only did the crime's technical and organizational skill mark a new level of illicit finesse, but it also opened a window onto Porfirian society and brought together a

realization of the related developments of crime, commodification and modernization.

Porfirian society could separate the violence that marred the perfect modernizing crime by attributing the act to Martínez, the only member whose skin colour, clothing, and cultural orientation was that of Traditional Mexico. In doing so, they preserved and reinforced the modernizing crime thesis developing at the time; that a progressing Mexico was ineluctably—if slowly—moving from a “violence to theft” model of crime. In addition, throughout the trial social assumptions of class, gender, ethnicity and race intersected with the public discourse on these transformations, not only in discussions about the trial but also in the actions of the accused themselves.

La Profesa broke open public discussion on changing perceptions of crime in modern society. It laid the foundation of the narratives surrounding shoplifting and the modernizing theory of crime discussed in the previous chapter. Sensational crimes have long received sensational press coverage⁹⁴⁰ but La Profesa occurred as the Mexican mass-circulation press was diversifying and expanding rapidly. The crime and its trial became a spectacle in the press, a commodity to be packaged and sold to “the public.” Journalists sought to provide readers with a comprehensible and comprehensive narrative of the crime, the trial, and the 939 On the secret police, see Frank, *Posada’s Broadsheets*, 107. On early closings, see *Two Republics*, May 5, 1891, 4.

940 Joy Wiltenburg, “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,” *American Historical Review* 109, no.

5 (December 2004): 1377-1404.

eventual demise of the criminals. They added to an increasingly rich urban narrative in which residents could imagine themselves as omniscient viewers and integral parts of this incongruous realization of competing social visions known as Mexico City. ⁹⁴¹ Journalists received assistance and authority from voices of the rising science of criminology who wielded the scientific authority in an effort to provide an incontrovertible account of both the actions of individuals as well as those of the larger society in the midst of rapid social and cultural change. This mixing of science and journalism blended into a new and extremely profitable popular criminology peddled by the likes of Julio Guerrero, Federico Gamboa, and Carlos Roumagnac who actually covered the La Profesa trial for *El Tiempo* and would parlay this experience to write his widely-acclaimed *Los criminales en México: ensayo de psicología criminal* in 1904. ⁹⁴² But for all the talk of morality, penitence, and head measurements, perhaps the greatest public attraction of the crime remained the jewels and their immense value.

The crime became a touchstone for the commodification of Porfirian society and its changing material culture. In his path breaking study of the town of San José de Gracia in the state of Michoacán, Luis González illustrates how this emphasis on materialism pervaded far beyond the urban zones of the Republic. The news and allure of the technological wonders in Mexico City joined increased trade ties with the outside to encourage young town members to strive to improve their material status. Social and community bonds remained ⁹⁴¹ For more on the role of the press and crafting a community narrative, whether national or urban, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed.

(London: Verso, 1991); and Vanessa R Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in fin-de-siècle*

Paris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁹⁴² Julio Guerrero, *La génesis del crimen en México: ensayo de psiquiatría social* (Mexico City: Imprenta de la Vda. de Ch. Bouret, 1901); Carlos

Roumagnac, *Los criminales en México: ensayo de psicología criminal* (Mexico City: Tip. “El Fenix,” 1904); Federico Gamboa became one the most famous late-Porfirian novelists after publishing *Santa*, a work centred on the prostitute Santa as it exposed the vices and immorality of the Porfirian metropolis (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1979).

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strong but loosened as the values of individualism and competition gained moral currency.

As González concluded, “it became fashionable to be rich.” [943](#)

With the shifting directions of social values, so follows the myths that society creates.

A society that treasured its material progress and culture could not help but mythologize and deify those who operated in, and yet threatened, this milieu. The cosmopolitan flavour of wealth and exoticism added by Treffel, Nevraumont, and Sousa reflected the increasing influence of international culture on Mexico City. Moreover, the robbers of La Profesa were not the social bandits of the past. Not once does any mention of any social redistribution of the jewels and cash appear in newspaper accounts nor in their actions. This is a sharp break from the myths of Chucho el Roto who robbed to avenge the actions of certain elites against him. The shift to materialism should not be exaggerated, as in 1900 the next urban bandit, Jesús Negrete—*El Tigre de Santa Julia*—again exemplified the beneficent bandit pushed to criminality due to social conditions. [944](#) Nevertheless, like the changes in San José de Gracia, the values of Mexico City society noticeably shifted towards materialistic individualism while retaining a significant grounding in traditional notions of social justice and solidarity.

Neatly dividing this struggle between popular and elite views does not do justice to the impact on society of crime and criminality. After the trial, rumours spread that Nevraumont and Sousa had begun to write a novel based on their crime, a novel that likely would find a readership among the gente decente and the elite, not the readers of Posada's broadsheets. ⁹⁴⁵ Moreover, the descriptions of the crowd at the trial suggests that Mexico's ⁹⁴³ Luis González, *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, trans. John Upton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), 64-104ff.

⁹⁴⁴ For further information on Jesús Negrete, see Frank, *Posada's Broadsheets*, 116-127.

⁹⁴⁵ *Two Republics*, May 3, 1891, 4, mentioned that several dailies circulated this rumour. In the United States, criminals of the nineteenth century possessed a long tradition of writing accounts of their exploits, see David Ray Papke, *Framing the Criminal: Crime, Cultural Work, and the Loss of Critical Perspective, 1830-1900*

(Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1987).

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progress-oriented "respectable" society took an intense interest in both the robbers and the crime. The sizable contingent of ladies from fashionable families implies a certain romantic allure possessed by Nevraumont and the others, perhaps the fantasy that those who stole them away from their families metaphorically might do so in reality. Maybe the attendance and fascination of the trial-watchers account for a peculiar ambivalence toward the general type of crime this represented. On the one hand it was feared, despised, and vociferously condemned. Yet it was also secretly, and not-so-secretly, admired by Mexicans eager to hear any fresh details about this sensational criminal exploit.

Perhaps, then, the members of the La Profesa robbery should not be defined as protesting but rather embracing the norms of their society. They merely came to terms with the value placed upon material wealth achieved through acquisitive capitalism in the manner most readily available to men without property or little means. Sousa, after a long string of business failures, looked for a new infusion of capital. Nevraumont appeared to choose the route of the leisure class by fleeing to Havana to spend his recently earned wealth. By violating elite social space and ransacking a bastion of material progress, they had come to the realization that crime does pay. United States prison investigator Richard Dugdale stated in 1877 that “we must dispossess ourselves of the idea that crime does not pay. In reality it does.” Ten years later, Italian criminologists named Colajanni argued crime paid better than honest labour. [946](#)

Although each of the accused entered the job for different reasons, perhaps Nevraumont, Caballero, Sousa and Treffel aspired to the rank and status of a new body of professional criminals who preyed upon the material progress of the age. They could choose 946 Rudé, *Criminal and the Victim*, 78; Dugdale and Colajanni are cited in Michael Crichton, *The Great Train Robbery*, xvi.

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their inspirational models from a host of international locales; maybe the Parisian jewelry thieves that Treffel had mentioned during the trial; or George White and Mark Shindburn who for two years prepared for their eventual theft of \$2.9 million from the Ocean Bank of Chicago; or even the great Edward Pierce who spirited away 12,000 English pounds worth of gold bullion in the famous Great Train Robbery of 1855. The point is that these were intelligent, professional men who committed the crimes they did

both for the challenge and the financial gain. Train robber Pierce spoke for them all when, asked why he committed the crime, he shrugged his shoulders and explained, “I wanted the money.” Later Pierce escaped custody, fled with two accomplices and the stolen cash, never to be found again. [947](#)

Whatever the case may be, the La Profesa jewelry store robbery and homicide temporarily threatened the day-to-day assumptions of Porfirian order and progress, bringing into sharp relief not only the assumptions of Mexican respectable society but also the aspects of its world that its members held dearest. This window on Porfirian society revealed the disturbing revelation of the inseparable development of property crime with the commodification and modernization of Mexico. At stake was the psychological investment in materialism as a concrete expression of progress, of an orderly, criminal-free future utopia.

Like Aesop’s lioness at the start of this chapter, the business relationship between Gerard Nevraumont, Nicolas Treffel, Jesús Bruno Martínez, Anton Sousa, and Aurelio Caballero may have bore only one crime, but its roar shook the whole of Mexico City society.

947 On the Ocean Bank robbery, see Larry K. Hartsfield, *The American Response to Professional Crime* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985); Crichton, *The Great Train Robbery*, 264.

Conclusions

To a remarkable extent a modern consumer culture came to influence Mexico City and beyond during the 35 years of the Porfirian Regime. This global process, filtered through Mexican cultural categories and practices became a distinctly local experience. It transformed the material culture of the city, from the food, clothing, housing, and entertainment of individuals to the physical landscape of the city. Importantly for historians, this consumer culture radically altered daily life for Mexico City residents in 1900 compared to even a generation or two before. Residents of Porfirian Mexico experienced changes at an unprecedented rate. Goods and the language of goods increasingly shaped identities and exacerbated widening fault lines between social classes. At the same time their use provided the means by which to challenge notions of visible social order and hierarchy. Mexican society, in other words, became increasingly reliant upon consumption as a means of communication, as a manner—or forum in which—to express, contest, and negotiate meaning. Whether this took the form of communicating and defining cultural categories such as gender, race, class, age, etcetera, or relating one's cultural proclivities by smoking a machine- or hand-rolled cigarette, or battling over the space of the city via zones of consumption, or an infinite number of other daily interactions, Porfirian Mexico experienced acutely with North Atlantic nations a growing reliance on consumption not only for economic but also cultural health. In this ongoing historical process, the arena of consumption was becoming the preferred forum in which to play out new as well as age-old conflicts.

Specific to the Porfiriato, this dissertation has sought to demonstrate not just the presence of a consumer culture, but specifically who helped to create that culture and how

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consumption became interwoven with the modernization process. Central to this endeavour was an illustration of how goods provided tangible proof of progress and its language shaped public discourse on social and cultural change. To a great extent, Mexicans came to understand the meaning of modernity (whether positively or negatively) through the unprecedented material abundance, novelties, and the ideas that came along with them that flooded cities, flowed into towns, and trickled into rural villages.

Through the selection of the cigarette industry and its marketing, diverse forms of advertising, department stores, and modernizing property crime, this study has sought to extract a number of themes with which to introduce consumption as a category of historical analysis. These selections serve as snapshots that often engage ongoing debates in Mexican historiography and that demonstrate the usefulness of viewing Mexican history through the lens of consumption to more established research methodologies. For example, stressing the role of business and commodities as brokers in transmitting and negotiating meaning in modern Mexican society brings into play actors generally absent in the discussion of state-formation, nation-building, and modernization. [948](#) Studying the growth of the domestic market, domestic manufacture, and imported goods serves to remind historians that the export orientation of the Porfirian economy did not preclude the development of a domestic consumer market and industrial base. This is the implicit conclusion of much traditional economic historiography and is only recently receiving reassessment. [949](#) Connected with this [948](#) Such an approach would complement works such as Gil Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds. *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). Of course, other historians have already begun to incorporate the business community in these processes but commodities and consumption remain absent. For one of the earliest and most forceful of these works, see Stephen Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1940); and Susan M. Gauss, “Made in Mexico: The Rise of Mexican Industrialism, 1938-1952” (Ph.D. diss., SUNY Stony Brook, 2002).

949 One of the first revisions in Porfirian historiography is Sandra Kuntz Ficker, *Empresa extranjera y mercado interno: El Ferrocarril Central Mexicano, 1880-1907* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1995). For a
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development is the rise of the New Institutional Economics school of thought in Latin American economics. Adherents to this approach eschew the structural approach of dependency and world systems theorists and seek to understand Latin American economic development from the vantage point of individual firms, entrepreneurs, and other domestic factors in concern with external forces. [950](#) This dissertation, with its original work on the tobacco industry and particularly the department store and French Barcelonnette community adds to this growing field of knowledge. Incorporating consumption into the construction of modern categories and conceptions of criminality intersects with a growing corpus of work on the subject. [951](#) Considering how consumption helped to construct categories of gender and class strengthens an already dynamic and substantial field of research. [952](#) As a subfield of this, research connecting prostitution, notions of the body politic, and the Mexican State could benefit from incorporating elements of consumption, drawing upon the considerable body of European historiography on the prostitute, linking the commodification of women with that of modern society. [953](#) A refresher reading of the Porfirian novel *Santa* will quickly discussion of this issue in Latin American historiography, read the Introduction of Benjamin Orlove and Arnold J. Bauer, eds., *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

950 See the articles by Joseph Love, John Coatsworth, and Sandra Kuntz Ficker in the Research Forum “From Structuralism to the New Institutional Economics: A Half Century of Latin American Economic Historiography,” *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (October 2005): 97-162.

951 Among historians publishing in English, Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato are the leading scholars shaping the issues. Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,

2000); Piccato, *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

952 William E. French and Katherine E. Bliss, *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Modern Latin America* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming); William E. French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Carmen Ramos Escandón, ed., *Presencia y Transparencia: La mujer en la historia de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992); Victor M. Macías-González, "The Mexican Aristocracy and Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911"

(Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1999).

953 The literature on prostitution is vast. Some of the more important texts are: Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Alain Corbin, *Women For Hire: Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference* in 366

demonstrate how members of the gente decente linked prostitution, consumption, modern morality and social health. [954](#)

Future areas of research are nearly limitless. As an introduction to an approach this dissertation has perhaps at times resembled a too-blunt instrument that future, targeted, and more nuanced studies will only improve upon (a fine example of positivist thinking). The preceding paragraph outlines several lines of possible inquiry. In addition, more work into urban working-class consumption (building upon Chapter Two) would be immensely revealing. Comparing and contrasting the consumption patterns and identities of workers in favoured industries offering decent

employee benefits such as El Buen Tono⁹⁵⁵ or the breweries would help understand better not only their material culture but also how they identified themselves culturally and socially within Porfirian society. A similar study, if possible, of the growing field of white-collar service workers such as department store employees would equally contribute to our knowledge of Porfirian class and gender formation. A study into the importance of “populuxe” goods⁹⁵⁶ (cheaper versions of more expensive goods) and falsifications (of everything from American soap to French Cognac and pharmaceuticals) would dive into a topic of great importance in Porfirian society, offering both findings for social and cultural historians as well as benefits for economic, diplomatic and political historians concerned with patents, patent laws, and international trade relations. In a more cultural vein would be a study of the tension between nineteenth *Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

954 Federico Gamboa, *Santa* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1979).

955 Work on El Buen Tono and other companies could amplify the research of Tony Morgan, “Proletarians, Politicos, and Patriarchs: The Use and Abuse of Cultural Customs in the Early Industrialization of Mexico City, 1880-1910,” in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance*, eds. William Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 151-172.

956 For more on populuxe goods, see Cissie Fairchilds, “The production and marketing of populuxe goods in eighteenth-century Paris,” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 228-248.

century liberal ideology expressing human progress and liberty through material advances—

often made concrete through consumptions and institutions of consumption—while at the same time maintaining a rigid social hierarchy. In essence, this would probe the Porfirian notion (a truly international one) of “proper consumption” befitting one’s place in society.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the novel *Vanity Fair* published at mid-century captured this worldview when George Osborne, criticizing the social climber Becky Sharp’s efforts to engage Joss Sedley, opines that “I’m a liberal man; but I’ve proper pride, and know my own station: let her know hers.” [957](#)

Connected with the notion of “proper consumption” could be an investigation into the *cultures* of consumption in Mexico. For example, Porfirian elites and social commentators criticized the Indians as non-consumers but consume they did. Perhaps not as much and of items not deemed “modern,” but indigenous communities tied into the market economy did have their own culture of consumption. At the same time, other traditional forms of consumption came under pressure from the modern consumer culture described in this dissertation. In fact, Porfirian society experienced multiple parallel consumer cultures that many Mexicans shuttled between. The struggle over consumption patterns during the Porfiriato was not only to maintain hierarchies within the modernizing consumer culture, but to also establish its dominance over existing ways of consuming and constructing meaning.

One of the most fascinating examples of this is the struggle between new merchants located in fixed-location stores versus street vendors and markets (If this sounds strikingly familiar with Mexico City today, you are beginning to see the possibilities of this argument for 957 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (New York: Random House, 1958), 42. Victor M. Macías-González has begun this line of investigation in the Porfiriato with his conference paper,

“*No son todos los que están, ni están todos los que son: Class and Masculinity in Porfirian Manuals of Civility and Etiquette*” (Paper

presented at the annual meeting of the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies, Tempe, AZ, February 2003).

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studying Mexican economy, culture, and urban politics as an ongoing, contested historical process). The whole debate and controversy over the destruction of the old *Portales* (the archways surrounding the traditional plazas in Mexico City, at the base of which were located multiple permanent and impromptu vending stalls) takes on a whole new dimension when we realize that the leading advocates were existing shop owners who wished to remove their competition, revamp their store façades, and install new retail innovations and strategies such as display windows and greater light to exhibit their goods. [958](#)

Mexico City, of course, is not representative of the entire Republic. Perhaps most pressing of all in the study of Porfirian consumption is a move beyond the metropolis, beyond Mexico City and into the states to consider not only the cities but also smaller population centres. It may possibly revolutionize the way we understand Porfirian material culture. Then again, it may not. The Introduction of the dissertation discussed the outlines of rural consumption in some detail. Understanding and tracking the agency system would provide great insight into the modernizing products available to clients in a small town's consumer catchment area. To give a specific example, Eduardo Maynez of Parras, Coahuila, served as the exclusive agent in his town for the following services and products: a savings bank in Monterrey, patent medicines, French perfumes, candies, Spanish and French novels, scientific and business books, music and instruments from Mexico City's famous Wagner and Levien, wines and aguardientes of the Carmen distillery, and pasta for the manufacturer

“La Diana.” [959](#) Finding and mining the archives of the *Administración de Rentas y Contribuciones* for each state in which traveling salesmen and peddlers were required to 958 The archives of the ex-Ayuntamiento of Mexico City provides a treasure trove of information on these subjects. See, in particular, the following *ramos*: Diversiones Públicas; Plaza Mayor; Mercados; and Portales.

959 Eduardo Maynez to José Yves Limantour, Parras, Oct. 23, 1902, CDLIV 1902, Roll 16, Carpeta 21, Archivo José Yves Limantour, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México CONDUMEX, Chimalistac, Mexico City.

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register would prove a gold mine for tracking the extension of a national market. Further work on mule trains would also aid this effort. Micro-histories such as *San José de Gracia* by Luis González would provide a richer understanding of these new goods and ideas upon smaller, more isolated population centres.

Many readers will try to compare the consumer culture of Porfirian Mexico with that of the leading global production and consumption centres such as the United States, England, and France. Mexico did not possess a consumer culture or market as quantitatively developed as these countries. Nonetheless, these countries (particularly the United States and France) had large swaths of territory that remained poorly integrated into both the nation-state and the national economy. [960](#) Viewed in this way, the consumer market of Mexico City arguably surpassed all but the largest urban areas of these countries. As a nation within a global economy, late-Porfirian Mexico did possess by far one of the most advanced consumer cultures among “peripheral nations.” It achieved this for a number of reasons: the goods and ideas pouring in from the United States through the North and Europe through the Caribbean ports; a growing domestic

manufacturing base at home; generally conducive government policies; and a significant portion of a population culturally receptive to developments from the centres of modernity. ⁹⁶¹ For good reason did the inventors of the cinema, the Lumière brothers, send salesmen to Mexico within a year of introducing their product at home. Historians need to incorporate this reality into their perception of life in Porfirian Mexico.

Mexican historians—including myself at times—often tend to consider “modernity”

as a veneer applied by the Porfirian leadership to Mexican society. For many, the culture of 1960 Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.

⁹⁶¹ Orlove and Bauer, *Allure of the Foreign*, discusses the heightened receptivity of Latin America over other regions in desiring and accepting the goods of Europe.

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consumption described in this study should be included in this thin façade. Such a perspective falls into the false perception that modernity represents a foreign import, a quality not embraced by the majority of the Mexican public, a scabrous affliction to be ripped off the body social by a purifying Revolution. But what remains? The Mexican Revolution did not return Mexico to an earlier time; most of its leadership came from the most economically dynamic region of the Republic, the North, and most of those leaders were staunch modernizers. The cigarette companies, breweries, and department stores all survived and attained greater levels of profitability and significance in the 1920s. The danger of this approach is in mixing political historical currents with deeper economic and cultural processes. While the Porfirian regime may have crumbled the many material and

cultural changes wrought by a global process and its local creators remained.

The Introduction to this dissertation ended with the remark by José Arcadio Buendía that “incredible things are happening in this world.” From this fictional and mythic account of village life in late-nineteenth-century Colombia this dissertation now concludes with one Mexican historian’s insight into how these “incredible things” changed daily life in his childhood village during the same time period. The similarities are remarkable. In Chapter Three of *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, Luis González discusses the changes occurring between 1900 and 1910. He introduces Don Gregorio, a prominent local merchant and liaison with the larger world who took local products to Mexico City once a month. As trade increased new stores opened and a greater number of goods arrived. New competition sprang up but Don Gregorio remained the champion importer and exporter. He was also the best storyteller and brought back tales of the city, of Don Porfirio, and new inventions like the train and electric light. In 1906 the first of a flood of newspapers from the

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capital arrived. Residents were astonished not by politics, strikes, and other national events but as González writes, “by the news of seemingly incredible inventions. There were flying machines with wings, the wireless telegraph, the telephone, the automobile, motion pictures, electric streetcars, photographs, the phonograph, the incandescent light, the submarine, aspirin, and other medicaments and artifacts of modern life.” [962](#) The chapter continues describing the arrival and impact of new goods on the town, the growing wealth, social divisions, and expenditures on making life more comfortable. With a transforming material culture and the ideas that came with it, González describes a shift in mentality, particularly among the young, that embraced change. [963](#) He notes the expansion of the residents’

worldview beyond the *patria chica*, the recognition of a budding nationalism and the identification of San José with the Mexican fatherland.

[964](#) Although he does not say it directly, Luis González captures the interconnection between material culture and mentality as he traces the diffusion of modernity into his childhood town.

Perhaps the distance between Porfirian Mexico City and San José de Gracia was not so great as we have imagined.

962 Luis González, *San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition*, trans. John Upton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), 100.

963 *Ibid.*, 88.

964 *Ibid.*, 106.

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This dissertation was typed by Steven Blair Bunker

ABSTRACT

Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911

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A rapidly accelerating consumer culture increasingly defined Mexican urban society during the rule of Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911. The significance of this global process at a national level can best be understood within the context of the economic and cultural modernization drive of the Porfirian regime. It manifested itself in a growing domestic consumer market and manufacturing base, an evolution of retailing and advertising forms, and the social and cultural implications of these developments. This consumer culture helped to define the visual and social reality of Mexico City and other cities, influencing architecture, street life, and other public as well as private spaces of urban Porfirians.

Equally importantly, its presence permeated public discourse, with consumer goods, institutions, and values providing the vocabulary and metaphors many used to help explain and understand the rapid changes that characterized their lives. In other words, goods and the language of goods gave shape and form to the abstract condition of modernity in which Porfirian Mexicans lived.

Using both written and visual sources, this dissertation outlines the form, institutions, and several of the major actors creating this consumer culture. This includes tracking the rise and evolution of the cigarette industry, advertising, department stores, and modernizing crime during the Porfiriato.

